

**MIDDLESEX AVENUE AREA-WOODWILD PARK
HISTORIC DISTRICT
RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Metuchen Historic Preservation Committee
Metuchen, New Jersey**



**Dennis Bertland Associates
June 2011**

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Prepared for: Metuchen Historic Preservation Committee
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROJECT SUMMARY1

SECTION I- Databases of district residents and their occupations c. 1910 and 19201-1

SECTION II- Photocopies of newspaper articles from *The Bloomfield Independent Press* 1914 into early 1915 relating to the “Brainy Borough contest”2-1

SECTION III- Photocopies of documents & maps relating to development of the project area3-1

APPENDICES

PROJECT SUMMARY

Scope of Work & Research Methodology

The project targeted research in three areas related to the history and significance of a potential New Jersey/National Register historic district in Metuchen: the Middlesex Avenue/Woodwild Park neighborhood. Dennis Bertland, director of Dennis Bertland Associates, and his associate Janice Armstrong performed the project over a period of six weeks. The scope of work for the three areas of research is delineated as follows. Work tasks were prioritized and conducted in the order listed.

(1). **Woodwild Park/Middlesex Avenue Residents & Occupations: Evidence from US Census and City Directories 1910 & 1920.** Using copies of directories on file at the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society, a list of residents on the streets in the project area was compiled, along with their occupations where given. Using *Ancestry.com* these residents were located in the 1910 and 1920 Censuses, and occupations cross-referenced with those of given in the directories. The work product was database of names-addresses-occupations (see Section I of this report), intended to help answer the following research questions: Who lived in the houses in this part of Metuchen? Were they representative of the literary or artistic residents who led to Metuchen's nickname as the "Brainy Borough?" The data was organized so that additional information on the construction date, architect, current condition, etc., of houses at specific addresses can be added in future. That neither the 1910 directory nor the 1910 census gave street addresses was a limitation, since some residents may have lived on portions of streets outside the potential district.

(2) **"Brainy Borough" Newspaper War.** In 1914 and 1915, two New Jersey newspapers, *The Metuchen Recorder* and Bloomfield's *The Independent Press*, promulgated a contest between the towns of Glen Ridge and Metuchen as to which municipality was home to the "brainiest" residents. Although a few copies of articles about the contest or references to the contest from other sources had come to light, the entire sequence of articles had not been studied. Such investigation might help to understand origins and substance, if any, of the contest. While no surviving copies of *The Metuchen Recorder* were found for the years in question, microfilm copies of *The Independent Press* were located at the Bloomfield Public Library. The microfilms were reviewed for the period from March 1914, when the contest began, through December 1915, when it appears to have ended (time constraints precluded extended the search into 1916. All articles relating to the "Brainy Borough" contest were photocopied (see Section II). Fortunately, the articles typically responded to and reprinted the previous week's article from the Metuchen paper.

(3). **Woodwild Park Development.** The Woodwild Park section of Metuchen developed as a distinctive neighborhood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. How this area developed has not been fully documented, and the following materials were identified possible sources of information on the neighborhood, particularly its initial development and geographic extent: The Woodwild Park Association records, if available, any newspaper articles related to the promotion of this area in *The Metuchen Recorder*, records filed with the NJ Secretary of State about both the Association and the Metuchen Savings Bank (whose website claims they "were chartered as The Metuchen Building and Loan Association in 1897 in order to develop the Woodwild Park area of Metuchen"), and any maps of the project area that might have been filed with the with the NJ Secretary of State or Middlesex County Clerk's Office relative to the development.

Unfortunately, the research effort was limited because of project time constraints. No relevant materials were found at the New Jersey archives. However, incorporation papers for the papers for both Metuchen Building and Loan Association, dated September, 1897, and the Woodwild Park Association, dated November 24, 1897, were located at the Middlesex County Clerks Office. A copy of the original 1855 deed by which Thomas W. Strong acquired title to the site of the future neighborhood also was obtained, along with the 1868 map depicting his subdivision of the property and the 1897 subdivision map of the "Woodwild Property" belonging to the Metuchen Building and Loan Association.

Summary of Findings

(1). **Woodwild Park/Middlesex Avenue Residents & Occupations: Evidence from US Census and City Directories 1910 & 1920.** A number of preliminary observations can be drawn from review of the census/directory data-base: Most of residents of the research area were engaged in professional occupations such as lawyers, architects, engineers, insurance and real estate agents with many working in NYC. There were also a few artists and skilled crafts people. Most residents owned their own home, quite a few without a mortgage. In the 1920 Census most adult children residing at home were working in occupations such as store clerks, stenographers and secretaries.

(2) **"Brainy Borough" Newspaper War.** The first article found, March 6, 1914, observed that Metuchen based its claim on residence of author Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and editor of *The Independent Press* challenged the *Metuchen Recorder* "to enter the arena of publicity to prove to the world, with clash of pens, which is the brainer 'The Brainy Borough' or 'The Brainiest borough'...now claimed for Glen Ridge." The contest was to consist of each paper publishing the name each week "of one of its metal celebrities and the wherefore of such celebrity. The loser to be the first paper which runs dry of such names" ['The Brainiest Borough,' *The Independence Press*, March 6, 1914]. The last article found, November 5, 1915, by which time the contest appears to have slowed down (or begun petering out) perhaps due to more pressing news demanding the editors' attention (war, elections, etc.) noted twenty names on the Metuchen "Hall of Fame." Four of the names appearing on the "Hall of Fame," were not on a previously list [*Nan-*

nygoats Newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society, " Winter/spring 2011]; they are: C. McKnight Smith, artists; Frank O. Thompson, "fraternalist;" The McCulloughs, child artist and poet; and John Duffy, publicity agent of Lehigh Valley RR.

(3). **Woodwild Park Development.** The Woodwild Park section of Metuchen developed as a distinctive neighborhood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the documents located shed some light on its development. The 1868 Strong subdivision map indicates that Thomas W. Strong had platted all of his property lying west of Abelle (Oak) Avenue into building lots, of which only about a dozen were indicated as sold and featured buildings (all houses except for one church). The portion lying east of Abelle (Oak) Avenue and comprising some thirty acres featured Strong's residence. It contained a large wooded area and pond and was named "Wood Wild Park." The Metuchen Building and Loan Association was incorporated in September, 1897, and the survey map of the Association's "Woodwild Property" (the former Strong property) dates to October of that year. The map indicates that most of the remaining Strong property has been subdivided into small lots for residential development. Except for a small tract of a few acres located at the southern end of the former Strong estate was identified as "Wood Wild Park." The Woodwild Park Association evidently was incorporated on November 24, 1897 to take title to the park

Recommendations for Future Work

The resident database should be expanded to include the results of the 1930 census and 1928 directory. Information on individual residents and addresses should be added as available. The deeds by which the Metuchen Building and Loan Association took title to the Woodwild Property should be obtained, as well as sampling of their deeds of sale for individual lots to understand how the nature of the conveyances changed over time/ The Metuchen newspaper could be search for articles relating the neighborhood's development. Obituaries of Strong and principals in the Park Association and Building and Loan also should be located.