Many have heard Metuchen referred to as the “Brainy Borough.” There is the “Brainy Boro” Post Office on Central Avenue, and there was even once a “Brainy Borough Building and Loan Association.” But do you know how and why Metuchen acquired the title?

There are several stories about who might have first used the nickname for the borough, but information in the Society’s Grimstead Room Archives confirms that by 1915, Metuchen and Glen Ridge were locked in a battle for the rights to call itself “The Brainy Borough,” each pitting their lists of editors, authors, magnates, engineers, lawyers, and artists against the other in a skirmish to determine the winner.

The April 25, 1915 edition of the New York Press Sunday Morning featured the conflict in an article entitled “Jersey Towns in Lively Contest to See Which Is More ‘High Brow’.”

As we know, Metuchen eventually won out, and shown here are some of the illustrious personages upon whose fame the borough made its case. Although the ‘official’ battle was won in the press, it is probably Henry Mills Alden who should be credited with the birth of the “Brainy” title for the borough. A long-time resident and vestryman at St. Luke’s, Alden was the managing editor of Harper’s Weekly for 50 years and often referred to as the “Dean of American Magazine Writers.”

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It was through Henry Mills Alden that famed figures such as Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Helen Keller, Ogden Nash, and Joseph Pulitzer visited Metuchen. Others made a more permanent connection to the town as well; Poet Joyce Kilmer married Alden’s stepdaughter, and the famed writer Mary Wilkins met and married Dr. Freeman here.

From there, the rest - as they say - is history. The borough continued to live up to its well-earned moniker throughout the remainder of the early 20th century, as evidenced by the list of dozens of more talented and accomplished residents listed on the insert. And this list is by no means complete: we seem to find out more about our talented residents all the time. So, if you know of a notable someone we may have missed, please contact us!

Right: Excerpt from the 1915 article, describing Metuchen’s position and odds of winning the contest against Glen Ridge.

Metuchen counts on eventually winning because of its wonderful organization. It is the most organized town in America. Even, the public schools have self-government, their own Mayor and Council.

The two volunteer fire companies, with their automobile apparatus, each with its own clubhouse, land on a blaze so swiftly that a pyromaniac with seven-league boots could not escape. The Shade Tree Commission has put out more than 600 trees in the last two weeks. The Borough Improvement League, seven hustling churches, twelve fraternal orders, three literary societies, the Metuchen Club—all these zip along at high speed, ever with an eye to keeping Metuchen in the brain van. Name your odds.

THEN and NOW

Can you guess the Metuchen street where these two houses are located? Many of the Borough’s Kindergarteners probably do! Both are remarkably unchanged since the 1930s when the pictures on the left were taken. Probably the most noticeable change along this street over the past century has been the growth of the street trees.

Except for the removal of the awnings, addition of the shutters, and minor changes around the entranceway, this home has changed little from how it looked almost 80 years ago.

This home has also changed very little since it was photographed in 1932, with the only major alteration being the removal of the second story porch.
The Brainy Borough

Listed here are some of the accomplished residents who have made Metuchen, NJ the “Brainy Borough.”

Henry Mills Alden, Editor of Harpers Weekly and often referred to as the “Dean of American Magazine Writers.” Moved to Metuchen in the 1860s, and was often visited by famed figures such as Mark Twain, Mary Wilkins (Freeman), William Dean Howells, Helen Keller, Joyce Kilmer, Ogden Nash, and Joseph Pulitzer.

Edward Ardolino, Noted sculptor, among his projects are the entrance pediments to the National Archives.

Frank Ballou, Cartoonist for magazines such as Puck and Judge.

Julia Hart Beers (Kempson), Artist associated with the Hudson River School and one of the first American-born women to be recognized as a painter and an artist.

Helen Christine Bennett (Mrs. B.F. Maupin), Non-fiction writer for periodicals such as the American Magazine, Pictorial Review, McCall’s, and Collier’s. Published “American Women in Civic Work,” in 1917, now considered an important resource on the history of the Suffrage movement.

Peter Edward Burrowes, Lecturer, essayist, and poet, noted for his early 20th century Socialist writings. Author of “The Crime of Richard Ruby,” and “Revolutionary Essays in Socialist Faith and Fancy.”

Captain Charles B. Carman, Architect and engineer known for his work at Raritan Arsenal.

Helen C. Carvalho, Writer for the NY Evening World under the pen name of "Neil Neilson."

S.S. (Solomon Solis) Carvalho, Journalist and later manager of all Hearst Publications.

John Ciardi, Award-winning writer and poet

Kate Claxton, Considered one of the best “emotional” actresses of her time, famously survived the Brooklyn Theatre fire of 1876.

William Coleman, Writer, associated with the agricultural magazine “The Country Gentleman.”

Charles L. Corbin, Partner in the Jersey City Law Firm of Collins & Corbin, specializing in railroad taxation.

René Coudert, International Lawyer.

William W. Crehore, Civil Engineer, named president of the Typewriting Telegraph Company in 1906.

Anthony DiLorenzo, Noted sculptor and ornamentalist.

William Dinwiddie, Journalist and photographer, particularly known for his work as a war correspondent and the famous photograph of Teddy Roosevelt and his “Rough Riders.”

Frank F. Dole, Noted dog fancier and kennel editor of the New York Tribune.

Charles S. Edgar, Clay magnate.

Clement W. Fairweather, Architect and president of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) from 1927 to 1929.

Manning Freeman, Democratic “Boss” of Middlesex County.

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman, Renowned and prolific author who famously socialized with Mark Twain and other literati of her day (see the Fall 2009 edition of Nannygoats for more information on Ms. Freeman).

Frank Gallagher, Journalist for the Brooklyn Citizen and Brooklyn Eagle, and served as State Senator for King’s County New York.

Abel Hansen, Ceramic & Porcelain Engineer, President of the New Jersey Clay Workers’ Association.
Thomas L. Hanson, Secretary to New Jersey Governor Larson.

Charles F. Heartman, Collector and dealer in rare books and noted publisher in the field.

Douglas Hicks, County Prosecutor.

Dr. A. Clarke Hunt, Sanitation Expert.

Dr. Theodore Whitfield Hunt, Professor and Physician.

Joyce Kilmer, Poet, remembered most for his poem, "Trees" (he did not live in Metuchen, but was married in St. Luke's to Henry Mills Alden’s step-daughter).

Gustav Lindenthal, Civil engineer and bridge designer known for the Hell Gate and Queensboro Bridges.

Jerome Lemelson, Prolific Inventor.

Chester Lord, Managing editor of the New York Sun for over 30 years.

Dr. J.G. Mason, Reverend and prominent nominee and candidate on the Prohibition ticket.

Roy H. Minton, Ceramics engineer and author on the use of materials and kilns.

Dr. C.C. Mook, Associate Director of Vertebrate Paleontology at the Museum of Natural History.

Ruth R. Mook, Geologist, studied at Wellesley and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Lewis Nixon, Naval Architect.

Mary Stanahan Hart Pattison, Suffragist, womens’ club leader, and domestic engineer who published scientific analyses of methods to make women’s work in the home more efficient.

F.M.P. Pearse, Assistant US attorney of Newark, secretary to Governor Silzer.

Aylin Pierson, Architect.

Hester Martha Hunt Poole, Feminist writer, associated with Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, Frances Willard, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Founder of the Quiet Hour Club.

Francis Marmaduke Potter, First Rhodes Scholar from Rutgers, Principal of Voorhees College, Vellore, India, and Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions.

J.K. Powell, Real estate agent and president of N.J. Realtor’s Association.

Charles A. Prickett, Editor of the Metuchen Recorder and highly involved with the 1915 battle with Glen Ridge over the title “Brainy Borough.”

Dorothy Richardson, Special writer for the New York Sunday Herald, published “The Long Day” about the life of a working-class girl in 1905.

Mr. Philip T. Ruegger, President of the Oil Association of N.J. and the Lorraine Oil Company.

George Silzer, Lawyer, Governor of New Jersey from 1923 to 1926.

F.G. Sinclair, Officer of the Bank of the United States.

E. Holden Spear, New York World Business Manager.

W.D. and Dalton Stevens (brothers), Artists and illustrators, primarily for periodicals.

Thomas W. Strong, extremely successful late 19th century engraver and publisher.

John L. Sullivan, Heavyweight boxing champion and first American sports hero to become a national celebrity and the first American athlete to earn more than one million dollars.

C.B. Veghte, President of the New Brunswick Trust Company.

Charles Volkmar, Renowned ceramist and painter.

Frederick A. Whitaker, Partner in General Ceramics, Co.

Walter R. Williams, Director and purchasing agent for Woolworth’s.

Rev. Edward R. E. Wilson, Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church.

Rev. Fred Zimmerman, President of the N.J. Classis of Dutch Reformed Church.


Pictured on the bottom left is Abel Hansen, on the top row (second and third from the left, respectively) are Roy Minton and Frederick A. Whitaker. From the Brick and Clay Record, “Executive Committee of New Jersey Clay Workers Hold Important Meeting,” November 4, 1919 (page 862)