

By David Wilson

Railroads brought growth to Nutley and workers needed boarding houses for a safe place to call home



## *Erie Railroad Stations helped spur rooming house need*

There have been many types of homes in Nutley, one & two family, apartments, townhouses, but none that can offer a history that includes grand interiors, twenty bedrooms, rent by the week, and occupancy by an ever-changing cast of characters.

Rooming houses provide just that, a private room to sleep in and shared bathrooms down the hall. Meals are from local eateries or simple ones such as sandwiches, as no cooking is allowed in the rooms.

Occupants varied widely over the years from single ladies and gentlemen, educators, transient professionals, to those down-on-their-luck, and section eights.



### *Latham House aka Gifford House, Kingsley House, Schatzie's*

The first house we will explore had a few names over the years, Gifford House, Kingsley House, Latham House, Schatzie's and was located at 144 Whitford Ave, corner of Nutley & Whitford Avenues. Tax records indicate a build year of 1870 which coincides with the railroad coming into Nutley, so there may have been some connection to providing rooms for travelers and business people. Bette-Ann Marko-VanEtten-Rebenack and Laurie Levereth who lived nearby in the 1950s, recall selling Girl Scout cookies to several residents who boarded Jersey City bound trains at the Nutley Station.



### ***Latham House aka Gifford House, Kingsley House, Schatzie's***

There were many owners through the years as the building's condition and quality of occupants ebbed and flowed. Joe Lazur, a local businessman, modernized the house and maintained it with a cleaning crew staffed by his daughters. The transient tenants and the deinstitutionalization efforts in New Jersey led to a general decline, making the location a nuisance to neighbors and public safety.

Rooming houses are considered life hazards by fire officials and subject to many inspections, drills, and regulations at state and local levels. Fire Chief Andrew Hutch insisted on good housekeeping, no smoking, and operating fire doors. Just prior to demolition in 2003, instructors conducted a smoke house drill for firefighters to practice search and rescue skills in the many rooms.

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The next stop on our rooming house tour is The Hillside House at 265 Hillside Ave a twenty-three room, six bath, historic structure dating back to the early 1890s.

Originally built by architect William A Lambert as a recreation center, a part of his vision to create a community of neighborhoods. First named the Franklin Club, later called The Hillside, game rooms, meeting rooms, dance area, and billiard room were the order of the day.



*Plaza House or Gillies Plaza House, courtesy John Demmer*

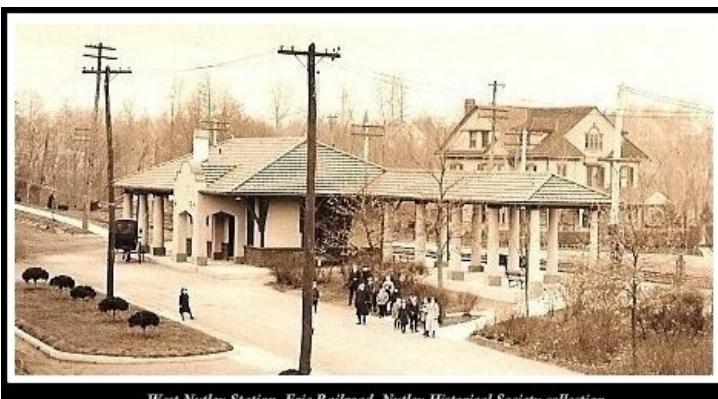
Lambert knew that diversions for working folks were needed and built another similar building called the Fortnightly Club at 642 Franklin Ave that became the St Paul's Parish House in 1920.

The building was adjacent to Lambert's Real Estate offices and West Nutley Train Station on the Erie Newark Branch. Passenger and freight service was frequent with trains terminating at the Jersey City station.

St Paul's Congregational Church was growing and used it as their meeting hall prior to the Lambert designed church structure being opened in 1895. There is a gap in the tax records probably due to a fire at town hall that destroyed many early Franklin/Nutley documents. We can surmise that the building started to be converted for short-stay lodging sometime around 1900 for perspective property buyers touring Lambert's Nutley developments built from 1890-1920.

The building's use as a rooming house was a natural progression, fulfilling a need for transient housing and weekly renters. There was a period when meals were served as part of the tenancy agreement, but this was curtailed to maximize profits.

It was operated under other names, but mostly known as the Plaza House or Gillies Plaza House, a nod to its location at the end of East Plaza. The Gillies family operated the business and lived there too. Numerous owners over the years resulted in the ebb and flow of the location as some reinvested the profits and others barely kept it maintained, even allowing it to go into foreclosure at times.



*West Nutley Station, Erie Railroad, Nutley Historical Society collection*

There were many long term tenants holding jobs in local factories or stores. You may remember Don a helpful store clerk at Gantner's Hardware. Other roomers included spouses that needed a cooling off separation or sons getting a little tough love from Dad. A schoolmate of mine, Richard, lived there for a time in the 70s at first in a one room unit, then after a stint in California, returned to a first floor, \$30 two room "luxury" unit with private door. Meals were purchased locally from Ralph's, and nearby delis.



### *Upgraded Stairway, 265 Hillside Ave, Nutley NJ*

An extensive renovation included new electric, bathroom upgrades, sub-division of larger rooms, fire doors, and security system. Now professionally run with an in-house manager, it is clean, smoke-free, and welcoming to twenty-two tenants. The \$185 electronically paid weekly rent includes a bed, table, chair, microwave, cable TV, refrigerator, shared bath, coffee maker, Wi-Fi, and window. A mix of working and retired folks enjoy the front porch on nice days.

A recent visit found all the historic interior features have been lost during renovations with the exception of a grand staircase and railing that if it could talk, would share stories of the many personalities who walked those stairs over the past 130 years.

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The final stop on our rooming house tour takes us to 308 Passaic Ave. This grand old home has many elusive stories, but we have been able to piece them together using maps, ads, memories, & pictures.

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High ground. Finest view around.  
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**Nutley, N. J**

The history begins across the street from where it found prominence as a boarding and rooming house. Maps from 1875 thru 1900 show the structure as part of a large land tract stretching from Passaic Ave west to the Third River and from Chestnut St south to Park Ave. Location would be about where Shepard Place now connects to Passaic Ave.

This property was owned by A.T. Stewart & Company, then Henry Hilton and appears to be farmland. We can safely assume this was home to the landowners, their family, and domestic staff. We can see the building's outline expand over the years indicating a growing family. Suddenly, a 1906 map shows the building now on the east side of Passaic Ave on a lot overlooking the area.



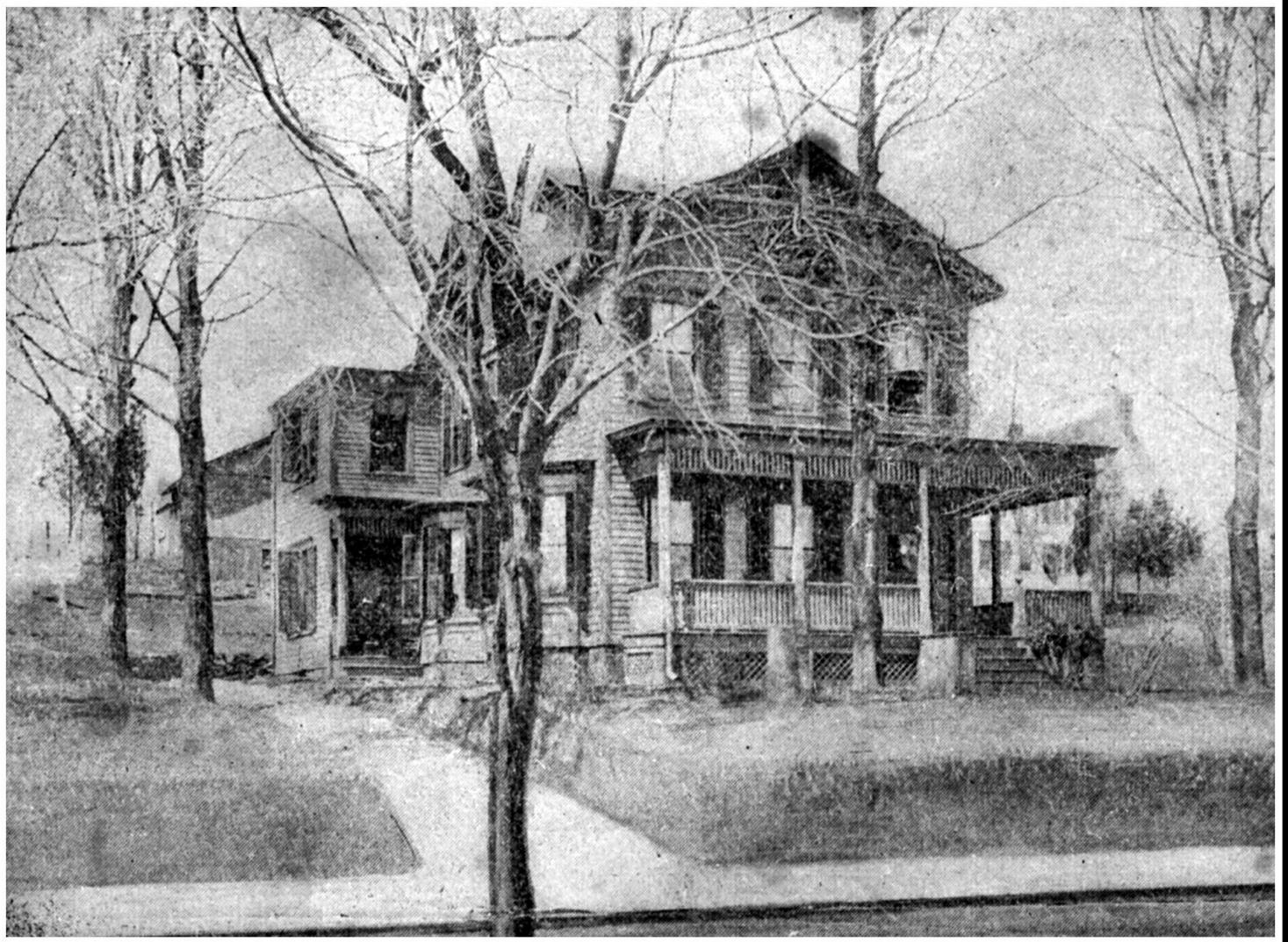
*Green Gables, Laurie Doeberick Dettloff photo*

Stories handed down through the decades referred to this structure being relocated, and research now supports this. Horsepower, logs, manpower, and ingenuity made this possible. A 1906 advertisement from Wm. F. Liebing highlights a new rooming house, six minutes from Franklin RR Station, pure well water, high ground, and the finest view around for twenty-five dollars a month.

Known as Green Gables, 308 Passaic Ave saw use as a boarding house where meals were served and later as an owner-occupied rooming house with twenty rooming units and five baths. Owners identified through tax records include, M. Giepet, Frank Nelson, Martha Priestley, Donald Odell, Paul Neudeck, and Diane Daeberick. Tenants included a diverse group of characters, transients, and schoolteachers.

The building had a grand staircase, marble fireplace, formal living room, and a large front porch, indicative of halcyon days housing wealthy landowners. The support structure had very severe termite damage and was repaired with a basement maze of new beams and columns.

During a fire in the early 1980's one tenant took a "swan dive" out the window into some bushes below. Fire Fighter Bob Verdi recalls this event and advancing a hose line into the building. To reopen, some repairs were made, a new fire escape was added, along with a fire alarm system and emergency lighting. The building was sold in 2001, demolished, and two one-family homes were built, ending a hundred twenty-six-year history.



### *The Wickham House, courtesy John Demmer*

The last rooming and boarding house is the Wickham House. This was located on Franklin Ave on what is now the Park Shop-Rite's north parking lot. A 1909 picture was located, but we have no other details or stories about this house.

I hope you have enjoyed this travel back in time to explore the rooming houses of Nutley. They were located near train stations and trolleys, within walking distance to employment, and provided "a place to hang your hat" for many hundreds of folks over the years.

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*Latham House photos courtesy Joanne Cocchiola*

*The Wickham House and Plaza House photos courtesy Nutley Town Historian John Demmer*

*Green Gables photo courtesy Laurie Doeberick Dettloff*

*West Nutley Train Station, Nutley Historical Society archives*

#### **Tags**

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