

## **From Indian Trails to Early Roads | Nutley Yesterday · Today - 1961**

### *From Indian Trails to Early Roads*

FROM FRANK SPEER

WARREN VREELAND, tired of hauling carts out of the quicksand, threw a rail fence across his lane and aroused the Dutch temper of short hauler Jake Kierstead. Out of the tempest born of Jake's anger came the modern thoroughfare which is Franklin Avenue, the main business artery of town.

Jake was a God fearing man, but he was, above all, Dutch and slow to arouse. Once aroused, he knew no bounds and when his way was blocked with a rail fence, Jake put on one of the greatest examples of gerrymandering in town history until he broke down the resistance of Town Hall and won the begrudging acceptance of Vreeland's lane as a street. For the immediate purpose, the muddy lane served Jake's purpose in hauling coal from the Erie railroad to the Harrison Mills.

Fifteen years earlier John Rusby had been the driving force behind the movement to cut Centre Street through the farms and woodlots. In 1875, to break another impasse at Town Hall, John Rusby drove with his 10 year old son George to the Four Corners.

Leaving his son to drive the horses and follow him, Rusby strode west along Will Stager's property and through George Stager's woods to Duncan Place (Prospect Street). As he advanced he swung an axe and brush hook to cut a passage for the carriage. Centre Street was born in the swish of John Rusby's axe.

Hillside Avenue was cut through only after Town Hall, with considerable reluctance, met Bill Vreeland's terms that the town assume the cost of uprooting his apple trees from the right of way and planting them "for free" in another part of his farm. Many years after, when Ridge Road was cut through, Mrs. Joe Payne tried the same tactics to protect her peach trees but, wisened by experience, Town Hall was able to cut its street through without paying for a single peach tree.

Nutley did not grow to its present quadrille of smooth, wide streets without pain and struggle, and, even, not without romance. There is romance in the established fact that the Lenape Indians, coming here for the annual Harvest Home Thanksgiving dance ceremonies at the mouth of the Third River, which they called their "Kanlivan," wore a trail which they called "Over the Rocks" and which, today, is evident in a half-dozen streets of town.

"Over the Rocks" came from the Watchung Mountains through what is now Montclair and Bloomfield and hit Nutley about where the Blair nurseries now stand. Just over the top of Povershon Hill, about where the Public Service

power line cuts down across the hillside, an outcropping of sandstone gave the trail its name.

The trail led the tired and dusty Indians to a welcome spring. The trail then turned sharply north and up the hill towards the present intersection of Chestnut Street and Hillside Avenue. That portion of the trail gave way to what became Valley Road, but in the later, more definite layout of streets, Valley Road disappeared.

To get back to the incident involving Jake Kierstead it is necessary to turn the calendar back more than 60 years. In those days, Franklin Avenue was called Spring Gardens Road and ran only from Unger Place, just about where the bridge crosses the Third River near Harrison Street, to the other end of town at Bridge Street, now Chestnut Street.

It was called "road" and that word best describes it, unless "lane" or "cow path" would have been more nearly correct. Whatever the appellation it was a half mile of hills and hollows, ruts and mud, but it ranked next to Passaic Avenue and River Road as the main artery of town.

At the northern end of the road, Warren Vreeland lived in a farmhouse which stood where the Bank of Nutley now rears its noble edifice. Behind the farmhouse where the Post Office, the Red Cross, The Nutley Sun, The N.J. Bell Telephone and other modern business buildings stand were Vreeland's orchard, his cow barn and his pig pens. The gentle slope down to the Third River was both orchard and farm.

Just opposite the end of Spring Gardens Road was Vreeland's lane, bordered with giant elms. It was cut by streams pouring down the hillside and there were spots of quicksand. In rainy weather it was a quagmire.

Once the Erie railroad was cut through and built itself a station where it crosses Franklin Avenue, Vreeland's lane was the only connection between the Erie station and the center of town. Jake Kierstead did not stand on ceremony. He drove his team of horses back and forth all day long, every day, hauling coal from the station to the Harrison Mills, now the Lobsitz Mills.

Jake never questioned Vreeland's proprietary rights to the lane but his anger exploded when one day, he reached the end of the lane with a load of coal and discovered that Vreeland had sunk posts and built a rail fence.

For many months, Vreeland had been trying to get the town to buy the lane, improve it and open it as a street. Angered by the delays and dilly-dallying at Town Hall, he hit upon the fence as a method of forcing an issue. It forced it all right, but it almost gave Jake Kierstead apoplexy. His contract to haul coal was useless without free passage, so Jake besieged Town Hall, accompanied by the whole Kierstead clan, numerous and noisome. Wilson Kierstead, town Republican leader, as suave and silent as his grandfather was loud and lusty, is the clan's leader today.

Jake proved to be not without influence and the town accepted the lane. Lew Smith, David Smith's father, helped Vreeland tear down the fence and the street was opened. It took on vital importance when the Paterson trolley cars pushed their tentacles down the street to the Four Corners. Later, alas, progress demanded the great elms be cut down and the present wide avenue was the result.

Centre Street had the same birth pains. After John Rusby hewed it out of George Stager's woods from Spring Gardens Road to Duncan Place, it took five years more before it was extended to Bloomfield Avenue. A third phase saw Centre Street push east to Passaic Avenue, necessitating a wooden bridge across the Third River which, the town records show, was built by Ruel Stager in 1875 at a cost of \$275. It was only much later that Centre Street was opened from Passaic Avenue to Washington Avenue through a hilly woods.

Washington Avenue was also slow to materialize. It was improved from Newark through Belleville as far as Joralemon Street when the tracks of the horse cars were laid, but any one coming to Nutley in those days had to climb paths through the hilly woods from Washington Avenue to reach Centre Street at Passaic Avenue.

A florist named Conover ran a flower shop in what would be the middle of Washington Avenue and Centre Street today.

Earliest of all the colonial roads in town was River Road which, before the colonists, was the Indians' Minisink Trail following the Passaic banks to Pompton. There are records showing that "Queen's Road," as it was called by the colonials, was laid out from Newark through Belleville, past Nutley, to Acquackanonck Landing in 1707.

With the opening of the quarries, River Road became congested with heavy, slow moving traffic. About the same time a new road was laid out from Queen's Road at the present Avondale bridge to Bloomfield. This is today's Park Avenue.

The first segment, from Queen's Road to what is now Washington Avenue, was called Quarry Road, because of the Phillips quarry on the south side and the Joyce quarry to the north. The name changed to Avondale Road in the segment from present Washington Avenue to Passaic Avenue.

Frank Speer, whose priceless collection of Nutleyana is rich in such old documents, furnishes the exact wording of the Governor's order creating the present Park Avenue, dated November 25, 1713. It read as follows: "Let there be a new road to Bloomfield, beginning at a white oak tree in the Queen's Road, near the corner of Abraham Vreeland's field, of two rods wide, running to the brow of the hill by Jacob Jourall's (Joralemon) fence, then along the said fence 'till it comes to a walnut sapling that is marked; thence by the line of marked trees to the Third River where we have ordered a bridge to be made and from thence by a line of marked trees 'till it meets the old road and along

the old road 'till it goes to the division line between Derick Tolson (Roelofsen) and Simon Vanwinkle, and along the south side of the said line to the west corner of Derik Tolson's and from thence by a line of marked trees to John Morris' east corner of his land and from thence along the north side of his line down to the Third River."

The description of the road to be laid out illustrates how roads became tortuous, anything but direct, because of a desire to avoid cutting up the cleared fields as much as possible. Only much later were the early roads straightened. Park Avenue thus became the town's first telford road with a hard surface made of rolled and crushed stone from the quarry waste.

The "new road to Bloomfield" wound its way, eventually, up the hills to Stone House Plains (Brookfield) and on to the town.

It takes a glossary to read many of the old maps and records. Chestnut Street was Bridge Street because of the little bridge over the Third River. Prospect Street, at its Centre Street end, was Duncan Place. Vincent Place, during the heyday of the mills, was, naturally, Mill Street. Calico Lane is the modern version of Rag Road of the cotton mill days near the Mud Hole, exCotton Mill Pond.

The strangest anomaly of all, however, is the appellation of Spring Garden. Today there are a Spring Garden School and North and South Spring Garden Avenues, but they have no historical claim to the name. The real Spring Gardens were in the south end of town, the truck farms on both sides of Unger Place or Garden Place at the end of the road which was to become Franklin Avenue, where Harrison Street now passes.

It was the Dutch who gave the name Spring Gardens to the rich truck farms. The Unger house, which gave its name to the place, stood there and stands today, an old stone house. Alongside was the old John J. Kingsland place, later lived in by Abe Stager who married Carrie, the daughter of "Peg-Leg" Watts, the town shoemaker. Carrie was a school-teacher at the old Hill School in the Western School District, where the Historical Society now has its home.

The Kingsland barn, off Unger Place, played a historic role in the town's God-fearing ways. Its vast emptiness served for a time as a church and both the Methodist and the Reformed congregations held their Sunday services in the barn.

The Methodist finally quit the barn in 1830 and built their own stone church on Passaic Avenue which 60 years later was to be abandoned to become Reilly's cow barn-thus completing the cycle of barn to barn. Reilly bought the abandoned church and moved it closer to his dairy which then occupied, with its pastures, the present location of Oakridge Avenue from Passaic to Park Avenues. A neighbor, Mr. Heller, who had the only house, facing Centre Street, which jutted into the pastures, forever complained about the cows and swore that for being housed in a former church they smelled no better than

other cows, especially in a Nutley summer. He was forever angered, too, when the contented cows would reach over a rail fence and nibble his rose bushes.

The Dutch Reformed congregation quit the Kingsland barn to hold services in the school at the corner of Centre Street and Bloomfield Avenue and, finally, just about 100 years ago broke ground for the present lovely structure on Church Street.

Next to the old Kingsland place was the tannery built by Frank and Ben Marsh, on the edge of a bay formed by the Third River where it twisted east and then north to run the waterwheels of the early mills. Eventually when Spring Gardens Road was extended southward to the Sargent farm at the edge of Franklin, the present stone bridge was built over the Third River, the same bridge which stands just south of Harrison Street and which the county engineers now plan to replace when Franklin Avenue is improved.

Thus has Nutley grown from those days when the official records defined a location "as the path now runs," the path being anything from an Indian trail, a deer run or a cow path. They antedated anything that still stands in Nutley - "Bend View," the old VanZandt homestead, the oldest house in Nutley, built in 1702; "Four Oaks," nearly opposite "Bend View," another ante-Revolution relic which was the former Van Riper homestead, and the Vreeland house in Chestnut Street, now the Woman's Club, built in 1702, whose well sweep in two and a half centuries has quenched the thirst of 10 generations of Nutley townsmen who stopped in the shade alongside the Third River to draw water from its cool depths.