

Old Newark Post Office Site Rich in History

Mid-City Hole Was Once Location of Academy and Customs House

BY ANGELO BAGLIVO

The old post office site at Broad street and Raymond boulevard, often referred to as the most valuable hole in the ground in the state, is a rich storehouse of Newark history.

For 15 years the site has been a gaping eyesore in the midst of the bustle and business of downtown Newark. Once the old post office was torn down in 1937, legal and civic battles have raged over who would purchase it from the Federal Government, for how much, and for what conditions and for what purpose.

Next time you walk past the scarred fence which hides the yawning excavation, close your eyes and try to picture what it looked like as the chapters of Newark history unfolded.

Old Newark Academy

Visualize the colonial-type schoolhouse of Newark Academy which occupied the site in the early years of the 19th Century. Or the square stone building—Newark's first post office and customs house—which replaced the academy in the middle of the century. Then remember the Romanesque "new" post office they tore down only 15 years ago. And to make the picture complete, recall the old Morris Canal that flowed where Raymond boulevard now runs.

At the Newark Public Library an old man of Newark home lets showed that Richard Harrison Jr. owned the site in 1667. He was the son of one of the original founders of the New Haven Colony.

Harrison was one of a committee of 11 men sent from the New Haven Colony to Newark "for the speedier and better expedition of things then emergent to be done." On May 20, 1668, he was one of six "Agents of Newark Town" who set the dividing line between Elizabeth Town and Newark. He died in 1690.

School Burned

A private manuscript map drawn by Samuel H. Conger, who lived from 1796 to 1872 and was regarded as Newark's greatest antiquarian, marks the site in 1776 as occupied by Joseph Curry, a member of a prominent family in the tanning business.

A Revolutionary War raiding party of British from New York played an indirect role in moving Newark Academy to the site. The first academy, built late in 1774 at the south end of what is now Washington Park, was burned to the ground on the night of June 25, 1780, by the redcoat raiders.

For 12 years there was no academy as Newark recovered from the impact of the war. A group of public spirited citizens, however, revived the school, incorporated themselves and raised the money for a new building by lottery.

The second academy was completed in 1795 on the old post office site. It was a handsome, colonial-style building, three stories high in the main section and two-stories in the wing. It is commemorated by Academy street, which was cut through in 1804.

In 1831, the Morris Canal was completed, running a 102-mile route from Phillipsburg to Jersey City through Mountain View, Little Falls, Paterson, Bloomfield and Newark. "The Old Ditch" flowed on the northern side of the academy site, where motorists now speed along Raymond boulevard.

Packet Boats on Canal

Packet boats pulled by mules or horses moved slowly along the canal. In the heyday of the canal's prosperity, the year ending September 1, 1834, more than 20,000 tons of merchandise was transported along the waterway by 1,085 boats.

For a quarter, you could ride a mule-drawn packet boat from Newark to Bloomfield. For another quarter, you could continue on to Passate.

In 1855, the academy sold its building to the government and moved to High and William streets. The government demolished the schoolhouse a year later.

In 1857, the first government-owned post office building and customs house in Newark was constructed at Broad and Academy streets on the site purchased from the school. It was a small, square, three-story-high stone building.

Soon Crowded

Many postal innovations were introduced to Newarkers in the old building, but by 1880 it already was overcrowded as 20 letter carriers and 20 clerks competed for space. The Board of Trade and other civic organizations agitated for a new post office and were successful. Plans were approved in 1890, construction began in 1894 and the building was completed in 1898.

During the period of construction, postal activities were carried on in the old edifice of the First Baptist Church, west of the site in Academy street.

The new Romanesque-style post office had a peculiar history of its own. Before it even was completed, it already was considered too small for the city's needs. It was reported that the building plans had been intended for a much smaller city, Wilmington, Del.

Then there was the mystery of the missing cornerstone. When the building was being torn down in 1936, workmen were warned to be careful not to destroy the cornerstone. But they never found a cornerstone. In fact, no one even found any record that there had been a cornerstone.

Eagle on Porch

All that ever turned up was the huge stone eagle that had graced the front of the building. It was found years later on the porch of a private house in Upper Montclair.

Even before the post office expired in the face of the drive for bigger and better things, the old Morris Canal had met its death.

The advent of railroads sounded the initial death knell for the famed water highway. Its business slumped rapidly, perked up briefly during the Civil War and then skidded again.

In 1871, the Lehigh Valley Railroad leased the canal from the state to supply an outlet to the New York market because it then had no New Jersey line. By 1910, the railroad reported that it had lost \$1,873,328 in its operation of the canal.

Din Over Ditch

Throughout the state, a civic din arose to abandon the canal because it had become an unused watery ditch. It made an ideal swimming hole for the youngsters in some spots, but at other places it was an odorous eyesore of stagnant water.

In March, 1923, the Legislature gave final approval to terms under which the Lehigh Valley retained the canal basin in Jersey City as a railroad terminus and the right-of-way through Jersey City and Phil-

lipsburg. In return, the railroad turned all the other canal property back to the state and also paid \$875,000.

The Morris Canal Abandonment Acts were passed by the Legislature in 1924, directing that the water be drained and the canal's highway bridges be removed and replaced with fill at roadway grade. Most of the cities along the route subsequently bought the canal land from the state.

Newark decided to use the canal for a city transit system and a highway overhead at a construction cost of \$11,000,000. The section of Raymond boulevard from Lock to Broad streets and the City Subway beneath it were formally opened on November 2, 1932.

New, Modern Building

In the meantime, public demands for a newer and bigger post office and Federal building grew louder and louder in the 1930s and finally could no longer be denied. The cornerstone for the present post office was laid in 1934 and the huge, handsome building was opened for business March 30, 1936.

WPA wrecking crews were turned loose on the old post office in October, 1936, and a year later it had disappeared from the face of downtown Newark. It left a barren hole, filled with memories of past service to the city and hopes for the future.