



Book:

Images of America: Montague

by Alicia C. Batko

2009: Arcadia Publishing

\$21.99

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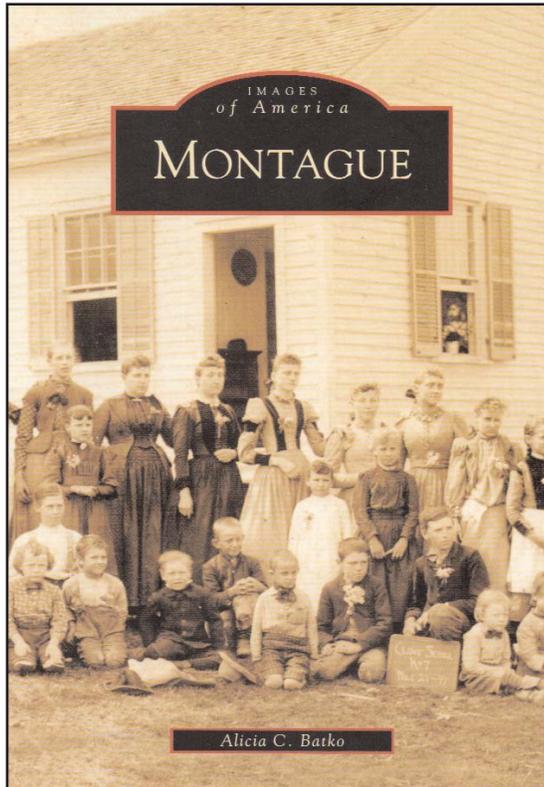
Softcover, 128 pages black and white.

★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

The sepia tone colored covers of the ubiquitous Arcadia Press “Images of America” series have come to dominate the shelves of bookstore and library New Jersey sections. Inexpensive and chock full of neat old pictures, they’ve promoted interest by residents in the history of their town and given local historians an opportunity to be published.

Among their latest offerings in New Jersey is Alicia C. Batko’s “Montague,” covering the northernmost Township in the state. It begins—as all good New Jersey histories must—with the original Lenape natives, but also the interesting



Alicia C. Batko

geology and geography of the Kittatinny Mountains and High Point. A representation of late 17th century maps show how the border between New Jersey and New York was different back then. The flat line that runs northwest along the top extended further up into what is today New York State, giving New Jersey the appearance of having a feather in its cap heading off to the left! There are also pictures of the 1882 Tri-State Rock where New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania meet as well as a New Jersey boundary monument that is, technically, 72.25 feet north of the actual border into New York! The area was part of the long-running dispute over where the exact border really is.

There was a strong Dutch presence from the early days of Montague and the proximity to the Delaware River supported cabled ferries and grist mills. When later “modern” bridges

were built, the old rafts were pressed into service whenever they were damaged by floods or ice.

Like most Arcadia books, this one features a wonderful collection of vintage photos highlighting Montague’s buildings and people. Vistas of the nearby Poconos inspired artists and were enjoyed by vacationing city-dwellers who frequented the hotels and boarding houses. But the place never gave up its rural charm, even managing to avoid the 1967 proposal for a Tock’s Island Dam and Reservoir.

Batko was born in Brooklyn, NY, but has lived in Montague since 1981 where she has been active with the Montague Association for Restoration of Community History—a.k.a.

MARCH—and serves on the Board of Directors for the Minisink Valley Historical Society and township historian.

Exhibition:

Plainfield: Lost But Not Forgotten

Plainfield Public Library

800 Park Avenue

Plainfield, NJ 07060

August 24, 2009 - October 17, 2009

Tel.: 908-757-1111

www.plainfieldlibrary.info

Admission: Free

Parking: ★★★★★

Kid-Friendly: H

Handicapped Accessible: ★★★★★

Exhibit: ★★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

The year I was born—1967—Plainfield, NJ was burning, gripped by the “race riots” that spilled over from

BOOK RATING SYSTEM

★ Poorly written, bad scholarship/factual errors.

★★ Factually correct but poorly written.

★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

★★★★ Strong scholarship, well written.

★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship writing style and graphic/typography.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com



Newark that July. Some argue the town is still struggling to recover and some neighborhoods do seem to remain haunted by the poverty and crime that sparked the unrest of a generation ago. The reputation from those areas tends to overshadow—unfairly, perhaps—those neighborhoods that have reemerged in something of the splendor that once was the “Plain Fields.”

The Plainfield Library’s “Plainfield: Lost...But Not Forgotten” explores some of that not-so-distant past through an exhibit of primarily vintage photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The buildings they record are all gone now, lost to development, fires and the general march of time. The organizers were smart in putting a case of photos and ads from Tepper’s Department Store along the wall by the library’s main entrance. Since the store closed in only 1977, it was likely a good percentage of the people walking in might be swept up in enough nostalgia to want

to see the rest of the exhibit downstairs.

I can recall being taken into Tepper’s as a boy with my mother. But I never really knew it dated back to 1907 until seeing this exhibit. Technically, while the business itself is long gone, the building remains—but its once-impressive façade is lost to a mid-1960s facelift. Tepper’s was one of several department stores that graced the north side of Front Street, including Bamberger’s (which later became Macy’s), Montgomery Ward, Rosenbaum’s, Sears and Steinbeck’s. At its commercial height, it was boasted that a lady-shopper never had to even cross the street to peruse multiple department stores and smaller shops.

We tend to view the loss of historic sites as an ailment of recent times, but part of Plainfield’s rural roots were lost to neglect by as early as 1917. When Phineas M. French dammed the Green Brook in 1853, he created a pond that drew local swimmers, boaters, fishermen in summer and ice

skaters in winter. An icehouse was built to supply locals with refrigeration and in the 1870s John Tier, Sr. built a popular pavilion to sell his homemade ice cream. It was so popular that it became known as Tier’s Pond and in 1903 a railway was built to give visitors rides around it. By 1914, however, it had become little more than a dump and the Tier’s Icehouse burned to the ground. Their house was torn down in 1937 for a parking lot.

“Plainfield: Lost...But Not Forgotten” highlights nineteen lost buildings in the city. About half of the images come from the Paul Collier collection—Collier was a photographer with the *Courier News* from 1900 through 1950. They reflect a sampling of Plainfield’s cultural life during the period. Some visitors will likely remember the substantial Babcock Building—a five-story office building from 1894 that leased space to everyone from the Chamber of Commerce to the DuCret Art School. It survived fires in 1902 and 1969 before a third in 1970 hastened its already-planned demolition. A McDonald’s now stands in its place on the corner of West Front Street and Madison Avenue.

In the late 19th century, Plainfield was a country resort (hard to believe!) that supported nine hotels. But the 1879 Netherwood Hotel was the crowning jewel, welcoming guests from New York City and Philadelphia to escape the noise and dirt of the city for pleasant horseback and carriage rides through the countryside. Plainfield remained an entertainment center for the new, early 20th century amusements—they even had an “academy” for it! The Plainfield Amusement Academy was a large building opened by Clark Evans in 1885 as a roller rink. Over its 80

years, it was called “Plainfield’s Pleasure Palace” and even “The Madison Square Garden of Plainfield,” hosting a cycling velodrome, drill hall, boxing and wrestling ring, dance hall, miniature golf course, convention hall, circuses, auto, boat, dog and flower shows and, for some reason, a silk factory. When it was first opened, crowds gathered to gape in awe in the glare of the clusters of new-fangled electric light bulbs.

Eight theaters operated in Plainfield throughout the years—both music halls and movies. The Liberty boasted the only theater in Union County that treated its customers to “refrigeration”—air conditioning. Walter Reade bought the Plainfield Theater in the 1920s, converting it from stock company plays to motion pictures and renaming it The Paramount. Some may remember it

Rosenbaum’s Department Store continued their own tea room on the site.

The Plainfield Seminary building, built in 1855, was known as “The Chestnuts” and was home to the Ophelton Female Seminary—also known as the “Plainfield College for Young Ladies” and “Plainfield Seminary for Young Ladies and Children.” It closed in 1919, but its alumnae group remained active into the 20th century. When the Second Baptist Church disbanded in 1857, the building was later purchased in 1884 by the Reform Club. They dedicated themselves to rescuing people from “intemperance” and claimed some of Plainfield’s more prominent citizens among their success stories. The hall later became the Orpheum Theatre in 1908, hosting a campaign stop two years later by gubernatorial-candidate Woodrow Wilson. The Calvary Baptist Church returned the building to its original use as a Baptist church until 1956 when it was razed for a parking lot.

Like Tepper’s, at least one more of the buildings featured survives, though in a different form. Temple Sholom dedicated their new building in 1927 and expanded it in 1961. The congregation moved in 2001, selling the building to Rose of Sharon who now leases it to the Queen City Charter School.

In the days before the widespread use of the automobile, Plainfield relied on the railroads to bring in visitors and provide access for commuters to New York. There were two train stations in the town, one at Grant Avenue—built in 1885 on donated land and with \$3,000 contributed by residents—and another at Clinton Avenue—built in 1872 and originally named “Evona Station” after the proprietor’s daughter. The Clinton Avenue station was described by *The New York Times* as the only example of its type in the nation, sporting three stories including living quarters for the station master on the second floor. The Grant Street station fell to midnight arson by two teenage boys in 1967 while the discontinuation of



before it was torn down in 1965 to make way for the Park-Madison Renewal Project.

More genteel tastes frequented the Clara Louise Tea Room, opened in 1927 in an old house complete with white picket fence. The candied sweet potatoes were popular among the shoppers and business people who stopped in. After the owner, Clara Louise Browne, died in 1949, the tea room moved to North Plainfield, but





service in 1971 resulted in the Clinton station being torn down.

While most of the exhibit consists of pictures, there are a couple tantalizing, tangible artifacts of the Talmage Mansion—the Queen Anne style home of New York banker, Henry Pearl Talmage. Constructed in 1887 at a cost of \$45,000, it remained in the family until 1968, burning down the following year. Original plans, a plumbing bill, a burglar alarm and light fixture (the latter two salvaged from the ashes) are included in the cases. There’s a copy of *The Courier News* from May of 1969 that features a front page story on the fire, topped only by news from Apollo 10 on its way to the moon—this was before the moon landing by Apollo 11 later that July.

I found it curious to think that the very building that houses the exhibit is something of a monument to how things change. The library used to be housed in the Job Male Public Library, Art Gallery and Museum—Job Male was the town’s first mayor. When they outgrew the fine old home in 1911, the town put a request in with Andrew

Carnegie, the “robber baron” steel magnate who was known for financing the construction of public libraries throughout the US. He awarded the library’s Board of Trustees \$50,000 and they build a new Italian Renaissance-style library. It was a classic “Carnegie library” in style and form. Several can still be found in New Jersey. Between this new and the original buildings, Plainfield’s citizens could access books and attend art gallery showings. As lovely as the old buildings might have been, they too fell to the wrecking ball, replaced in 1968 by the present building that now pays homage to what came before it.

The exhibit is small, but worth the trip for anyone who is familiar with the area. For some visitors, it will bring back memories. For others, it is to be hoped they can take some pride in what Plainfield used to be. But also that they might look for the many fine old buildings that still stand and realize that while some of the past is indeed gone—if not forgotten—there is still much that remains retrievable.



EXHIBIT PARKING RATING SYSTEM

★ Not enough parking.

★★ Not many spaces but enough for a small museum/site.

★★★ Plenty of parking.

EXHIBIT KID-FRIENDLY RATING SYSTEM

★ Not really something young children will enjoy.

★★ Older children may find interesting.

★★★ Children of all ages will enjoy.

Some exhibits may not be for children but institutions may offer programs specifically for interpreting the displays for kids and school groups. Contact the museum or site.

EXHIBIT HANDICAP ACCESS RATING SYSTEM

★ Not accessible.

★★ Partially accessible or requires advance arrangements.

★★★ Fully accessible.

EXHIBIT RATING SYSTEM

★ Very amateurish; factual errors; poorly displayed.

★★ Factually correct but poorly displayed.

★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

★★★★ Strong scholarship, well displayed.

★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship and display quality.

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