

Nomination Report

**Closter Depot Building
1 Station Court
Closter, New Jersey**



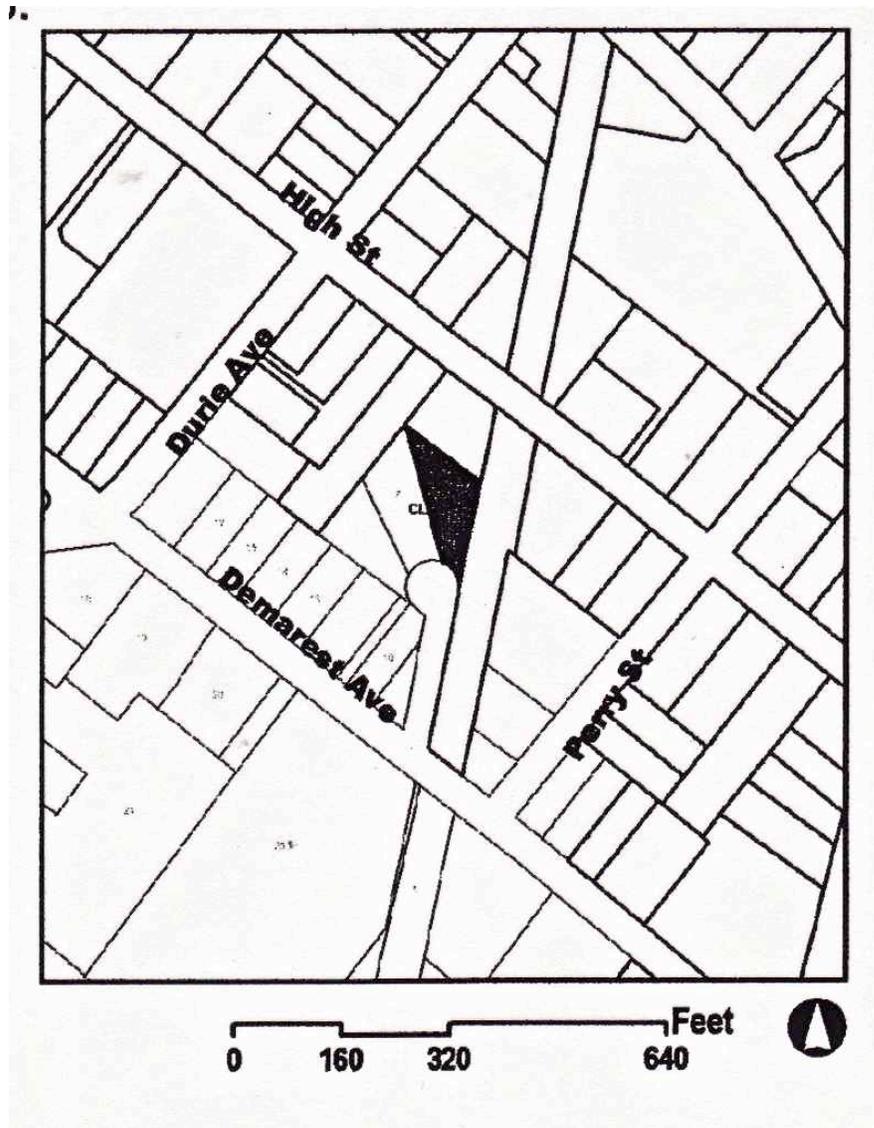
M.P. 20.4

Train time at CLOSTER. In the 1900's John W. Ringling lived in Alpine and visited this station daily during the circus season to keep in telegraphic touch with his traveling sawdust empire. Ralph W. Tracy was the agent and telegrapher. The call was CO.

**Closter Historic Preservation Commission
January, 2013**

DESCRIPTION:

Location: 1 Station Court
Closter, NJ 07624
Block 1317 Lot 6



Closter's former railroad depot is a one and a half story, six-bay building in the Stick Style. The building has a stucco and timber frame façade. It is unusual, as it has a bay window facing the track as well as one on the street side. The 1982 Bergen County Sites Survey states: "The main façade faces the railroad tracks. The

building has a side gable plan, pronounced overhanging eaves with chamfered roof trusses and brackets that have carved designs, and on the north, a projecting square tower through two stories with a pyramidal roof, a gabled hood over the window on the east side, the original woodwork trim under the eaves, and a finial with a lightning rod. The building also has an asphalt shingle roof, replacement one-over-one windows with modern storms, and six-over-six snap-in muntins, two exterior brick chimneys, and a porch with plain wood railings on the north end. The main entryway has a modern door surmounted by a transom.”

A circa 1875 stereographic photo of the Closter station, before it was moved, has a smaller tower and doesn't show a long porch area. After the depot was moved, photos show that the tower once had a decorative truss (a modified king's post) in the gable. The Depot building still has interesting cornices with carved brackets, and board and batten siding in the frieze. The gable end has a modified sunburst detail. Old photos show a small finial over the tower window gable with a similar finial and possibly a weather vane on the pyramidal rooftop. The tower finial might be the original, since the finial bottom still shows through inside of the building.

The northern porch has a king's post decorative truss as shown in old photos. Many outside windows have wide rectangular molding surmounting the windows. The original windows were taller. Early photos show a much longer porch, scalloped shingles on the tower and curved framework under the tower windows. There is no chimney in any old photos, even as late as the 1930s. The current fireplace was built in 2004. Adding to the historic significance of the building are two cement benches stamped with the “ERIE” name, sitting between the depot and the tracks.

The interior still has original sandstone walls, from stone quarried out of the cliffs in Closter and Alpine. Prominent local businessmen were owners of the local quarries, including William Tate (Original owner of 292 West Street, now in Closter's Historic District), and James Taveniere and Darius Johnson (partners in the livery stable). The interior includes three chamfered cross tie beams; one is original and two are reconstructed. Decorative woodwork in the Italian style that surrounds the upper windows was probably added by a later owner.

A circa 1910 photo shows railroad agent, Ralph W. Tracey, at his large roll top desk, which was placed against a wall, not in front of the bay window. Other photos show different attempts to beautify the surroundings of the station. A large flower bed with the name "CLOSTER" spelled out in large white letters on a little hill facing the tracks, appears in photos. Years later, the flowers gave way to a parking area. One old photo shows an outdoor pump under the long porch and some birdlike "carved details" on the roof corners. It seems our local carpenters had a playful side.

According to information in *The Architecture of Bergen County*, there are only a few extant railroad stations in the county that were built in a similar style. However, most of them have lost some decorative trim. These stations are important, "as visual symbols of their towns' histories as mid-nineteenth-century suburbs."

The National Register of Historic Places lists eleven railroad stations from Bergen County, plus a signal tower. They are listed in the area of significance under Transportation Architecture, and under the sub-function "rail related." It is time for the Closter Railroad Station to be included in this list.

HISTORY:

According to the *Bergen County Historic Sites Survey Report*, "The railroad station, placed at the intersection of the tracks and Old Closter Dock Road, became a hub for residential and commercial expansion. This amazing growth is clearly revealed by the contrast between a map of Closter published in 1861 and Walkers Atlas of 1876." The date for the construction of the station is listed as circa 1875; however, it might be earlier, as a Rockland County newspaper in 1873 mentions businesses and hotels in close proximity to the depot in Closter, and for some unknown reason an "1860" sign hangs above the station door. There are other "clues" for an earlier date of construction. For example, in her diary, Maria Ferdon mentions a clambake being held at the depot in August of 1862. A newly discovered

1863 walking map of NYC and vicinity has an “Upper Station” building in the same position as where the first Closter depot was located.

Closter was one of the three original stops on the Northern Railroad, along with Englewood, New Jersey and Piermont, New York. Of the fifteen New Jersey stations that were eventually built, only four remain standing today: Englewood, Tenafly, Demarest, and Closter. The one lone extant freight house is located in Closter, on High Street just north of the depot building.

The Tenafly and Demarest stations are listed in the National Register of Historic Places; unfortunately, Englewood’s station has been architecturally compromised. Tenafly’s station was built between 1872-1874 and cost \$12,000. Tenafly tore down a wooden station when the villagers decided to build an impressive stone station to better fit the town’s importance as a resort area. The Demarest station was built in 1872 for \$6,000.

Railroad stations were built in a great many architectural styles, and some railroad companies, according to Brian Solomon in *America’s Railroad Stations*, “had architects design groups of similar looking stations.” “The Boston & Albany line hired the famous American architect, Henry Hobson Richardson, to design their stations.” The Demarest station was designed by the famed architect, J. Cleveland Cady. It is known from saved ticket stubs that Mr. Cady traveled to and from the Closter station on several occasions. Most stations, however, were planned by the railroad’s engineers, and some stations were possibly prefabricated. In the mid-19th Century, Closter had many able builders, from John Henry Stephens to William Lindemann, and further research might someday discover who designed and built the “Closter City” station.

The Closter depot was an integral gathering place for local residents and reflected the status of the town. The train brought many people into and through Closter. Children traveled by train from as far away as Piermont and Englewood to attend the Closter Institute, a private school run by Belle Hammond. (Founded in 1863, it was one of the county’s best known educational institutions for many years.) People gathered around the pot-bellied stove inside of the station to

exchange news and tell stories. Closter's first murder victim, David W. Cole, was found at the depot in 1882.

Maria Ferdon, a Norwood/Closter resident who wrote diaries covering pre-railroad days up to 1879, travelled on the railroad often, and she always thanked the Lord when she returned safely. She wrote: "It is so easy to live by the Station...no trouble to find a way to get home." In 1863 and 1865, she mentions attending sermons preached at the Closter Station. In 1870, Maria walked from the Naugle – Auryansen Cemetery (where she and her parents are buried) "through the new road from Ruckman to the Closter Station." She also mentions going to the station and receiving letters. Later, she notes that thieves broke into the Station house in 1876, and that they had "blown the safe open and taken postage stamps, registered letters etc." Her diary entry on October 22, 1877 states: "Jack Fish was hurt by the cars and brought to the Station house where he died. This is the second accident in a few weeks time." In January of 1879, "Snow storm today. Cars run with two engines." And in May 1879, "The twentieth anniversary of the cars running on the Northern railroad, flags are flying."

By 1875, a booklet by E.G. Tuckerman, *Summer in the Palisades, A Description of the Northern Railroad of New Jersey and the Palisades*, mentions that Mr. Stephens "now has charge of one of the neatest depots on the line" and that Closter "has more of a look of business than any station thus far on the road, except Englewood."

For decades, when the station building housed the only telegraph in the area, John W. Ringling, of circus fame, and Wall Street barons came almost daily to send and receive messages. According to *The Railroad Station: A Social History*, "the status of stations was often distinguished by the presence or absence of a separate telegraph operator." Plus, "[the] telegraph operator was often given an office in [the] tower, conveniently positioned at the very level at which the telegraph lines entered the building."

Ralph W. Tracy was for many decades both the railroad agent and the telegraph operator in Closter. It is easy to forget how important the telegraph was to a community. Volume 37 of *Telegraph and Telephone Age* (1919) mentions "David Wark, well known in commercial telegraph and brokerage circles, is now

telegraph reporter for the New York Stock Exchange. Mr. Wark is mayor of his home town, Closter, New Jersey.” (Mr. Wark was also the owner of the Hazelworth Kennels in Closter). Melvin Quackenbush wrote in his book, *Look Over My Shoulder*: “when Jess Willard fought Jack Johnson for the world’s heavyweight title and won at Havana, Cuba in 1915, all the town went down to the depot where the fight was reported by telegraph round by round.”

Quackenbush also wrote, “All the coal, lumber, foods, clothing, pots, pans - everything needed to maintain life - came by the railroad.” According to Wheaton J. Lane in his book, *From Indian Trail to Iron Horse*, “Trucking and general farming were aided by the railroad, which gave ready access to the New York market.” In a 1925 school project, Closter resident Hazel Doremus wrote, “During strawberry season, extra cars would be added to haul the berries into New York City” and that “a special milk train ran from Tappan to New York every evening.” The station was so important that both the Rockland County and Englewood newspapers noted that the station was newly painted in the winter of 1880-1881. The *Tenafly Record* also noted in November of 1900 that, “Uncle Tom,” the colored man who had a boot-blackening stand at the Closter railroad depot this past summer, moved to Paterson.”

Another historic personage associated with the Closter Railway station was the famous architect J. Massey Rhind. Rhind (1860-1936) had developed a promising career in Europe when he decided to emigrate from his native Scotland to the United States. A chance visit to Closter on the Northern Railroad, convinced the successful artist and businessman to open up a marble-carving yard on Demarest Avenue next to the tracks. Proximity to the depot allowed Rhind to load large sculptures onto the train. By the time of his arrival in Closter in 1899, Rhind had already executed designs for the façade of the Alexander Memorial Hall, Princeton University (1892); a set of the Astor Memorial Doors, Trinity Church, New York City (1896); and the sculptural program of Grant’s Tomb (1897). Other notable commissions include the decorations for the Shelby County Courthouse (Memphis, Tennessee), the Wayne County Building (Detroit, Michigan), the Federal Building (Providence, Rhode Island), the United States Court House and Post Office (Indianapolis, Indiana) and a depiction of President William McKinley, carved from

a thirty-five ton piece of marble and the centerpiece of McKim, Meade & White's National McKinley Birthplace Memorial in Niles, Ohio (1917).

By 1900, the station area was so busy and clogged with traffic that the building was moved a long block south of town to its present site on Station Court, off Durie Avenue and adjacent to High Street to the North. The 50th Anniversary Borough of Closter book states, "The Erie, now in control of the Northern Railroad overnight moved its station and placed it upon its present foundation, a block south and on the opposite side of the tracks." According to one source, the land where the station was placed, was owned by Mr. Ackerman, and the station was moved in 1881. However, the Beer's 1891 map shows the "RR depot & P.O." in the original spot downtown.

After World War I, railroad traffic started to slow down, as other means of transportation became popular. However, because of war-time restrictions on rubber and gasoline, railroad travel increased during World War II. Local resident Petey Simmens wrote: "Camp Shanks (in Orangeburg, NY) was an embarkation camp in the beginning and thousands of men passed through when being shipped out, most were put in old passenger cars of the Northern Railroad and came down through Closter to troop transports in New York harbor."

Longtime Closter resident Al Bjorkman, remembers that one day in the early 1940s, his father boarded the train for NYC and felt something bumping his leg. He looked down to find that the family dog, Mitzi, a husky mix, had followed him and had to be quickly tossed off of the train. Mr. Bjorkman also remembers that the telegraph operator was always sitting in the bay window facing the track, busily tapping away, and that the waiting room had big long benches.

Passenger service on this line ended in 1966, and in ensuing years, the station became an antique store, then an arts and crafts shop, and then a guitar and music store, before it was turned into a charming single-family home. It now enjoys a long-term rental arrangement with the Northern Valley Regional School District,

for special education classes. Whatever use is found for the old railroad station, its background is important, and as Brian Solomon writes in *America's Railroad Stations*, "while the station may not be the vital community center it was in the past, the railroad station lives on, and its history is part of us."

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND HISTORY

As stated before, Closter's core historic district was formed after the coming of the Northern Railroad in 1859. In February 25, 1854, *The Rockland County Journal* details the charter meeting of the members proposing this railroad. Two of the most important men present were Thomas W. Demarest, who became president and later superintendent of the railroad (Demarest is also known for donating the land for Closter's Dutch Reformed Church) and John Van Brunt, who became secretary, treasurer, and later director of the railroad. According to a *New York Times* article, the chief engineer was William Sneden, who surveyed the location of the line.

Around this time, the *Newark Sunday News Magazine* stated that "The Erie, in Bergen County, advised persons desiring to live in that "Mecca of suburban dwellers" to "lose no time in selecting your property." Such action was certain to make "your children and your children's children rise up and call you blessed."

Several land speculators from New York viewed the line location and were impressed enough with the area to invest in buying large plots of land. J. Wyman Jones (who became father of Englewood) and I. Smith Homans (Homans Road in Closter is named after him) bought property in Englewood, Closter, and Norwood. Another investor, John H. Stephens, according to E.G. Tuckerman, envisioned "a vast change for the better along the whole valley to the west of the Palisades." He bought land where "there were no houses any where around – the site being but little better than a solitary swamp".

The History of Bergen and Passaic Counties states that Stephens caused a station to be established in Closter. In 1857, he built the first commercial building in what was to become downtown Closter and helped draw up plans for the town.

Before the depot was built, he sold train tickets and ran the post office from his general store.

Before the advent of the railroad it took two days for a round trip to New York City via horse-drawn carriage. After the railroad was built it was only a 50 minute commute, and, according, to a 1903 Trade Improvement Association booklet, two-thirds of Closter's male citizens at that time were commuters.

Some locals were not so happy with the coming of the railroad. Closter resident, Maria Ferdon, wrote in her diary in May of 1858 that: "Father had to sell his land to the Northern railroad. They commenced working about this time." In February of 1859, she commented about crossing the tracks: "this is the last time that I came over with the horses and wagon without fear, ever after this there will be fear to cross with the horses." She also tells about people and animals being struck by trains and killed.

In a book published by J. A. Humphrey of Englewood , he wrote "I presume many timid people made their wills and parted with reluctance and fear before taking passage for the first time." People soon got over their fears, however, so much so that the Erie Railroad in 1924 sponsored an "oldest commuter" contest. J. Z. Demarest of Closter won for having started to commute by railroad in 1867.

An article in the *New York Times* (April 1858) mentions "arrangements have been made for the free use of their track from Blanch's Station to the village of Piermont." Also in 1858, *The New York Daily Tribune* mentions Blanch Station about a mile west of Piermont. (This may be confused with the hamlet of Sparkill which was early on known as Blanch's Crossing.) The 1859 Northern Railroad map shows a station in downtown Closter and has the name Col. Blanch with a building on the northern border of Closter and Norwood (Blanch Ave. area). The Hopkins Cory map of 1861 shows a Col. Blanch's Station with a nearby hotel in the border area of Closter, Norwood, and Harrington Park, as well as a hotel in downtown Closter. An 1863 Walking map of NY and vicinity has Col. Blanch's Station (big letters) with a nearby hotel, and an Upper Station (small letters) and a hotel located in downtown Closter.

In an automatically generated text from a Rockland County Journal dated January 1860, an article about the Northern Railroad states: "At Col. Blanche's Station, a large and neat looking station In use and dwelling has been erected by Mr. Ab. Ferdou (Ferdon), and is occupied: is now as a public house by Mr. Nathan Hard, who is at the same time is acting station agent. The prospects for early improvements here are very promising, and in its neighborhood several buildings have also been erected, in consequence of the opening of the railroad. At Upper Closter they are determined to have a city as soon as possible, and its pleasant, airy, and healthy location, seems well calculated for that purpose. Three handsome buildings have already been erected since the opening of the road."

By 1876, the Walkers map no longer shows Col. Blanch's Station or the hotel. Although in 1903, when Closter incorporated, boundaries included the road to Col. Blanch's Station.

Colonel Thomas Blanch was a local Revolutionary War hero and one of the most prominent men in Bergen County. He fathered a large family and, according to Wintrop S. Gilman, "lived in a one story stone house." Later this house and property was probably Anthony Monaco's pansy farm at 26 Blanch Avenue, which was torn down before Closter's Spectrum for Living was built.

Col. Blanch helped his son, Richard, buy a historic stone house in Norwood, that was an inn and later owned by a great grandson. He also helped a son-in-law to buy the historic home at 151 West Street in Closter. Thomas Blanch, Jr. bought 19 local properties between 1805 and 1822, and many Blanch descendants lived in the northern Bergen County area and intermarried with old families such as the Blauvelts, VerValens, and the Harings.

Englewood had three stations on the Northern Railroad, so the fact that Closter had two is not surprising. It's likely that the station building burned (which was often caused from sparks from the train engine) and the hotel became a different dwelling or burned down. Luckily, the "Upper Station" depot, with its many charming features, still stands to remind us of a different era.

HISTORIC DESIGNATION RATIONALE:

The Closter Master Plan, Historic Element, adopted on April 6, 2011, states: “Protecting Closter’s rich history and extensive inventory of historic buildings helps to retain the community’s special character and authentic sense of place, connecting us with our past. Historic buildings, structures, neighborhoods, and inspired landscapes shape the community’s identity, providing a sense of stability and enduring values.” The railroad depot building is specifically listed as a potential site for designation in both the Historic Element (pg. 56 number 224) and in the 2008 Master Plan Re-examination Report.

The station is listed as a key contributing building in the Closter Historic District, which is centered around the railroad station. The station is associated with the Borough’s change from a small, self-sufficient farming community to a commercial center of the Northern Valley and a commuter railroad suburb. Closter was one of the three original stops on the Northern Railroad that began service to Closter in 1859. The depot in its earliest years was an integral gathering place for Closter residents. The depot is also associated with people of historic local and national importance.

Thus, the Closter railroad depot building meets local designation criteria as established in Closter Borough Code Chapter 35, Sections 54 (A) subsections 1,2,4 and 5.

Section 54(A)(1) recognizes the significance of buildings “associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the Borough of Closter by reflecting or exemplifying the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community.” As delineated above, the railroad depot represents the coming of the railroad into Closter and the economic boom that immediately followed and changed Closter from a primarily agrarian economy into the modern “Closter City” with an attendant population boom, as well.

Section 54(A)(2) recognizes the significance of buildings that are “associated with historic personages important in national, state, or local history.” As noted in the history, the Closter depot is associated with such national figures as circus owner John W. Ringling and architect J. Cleveland Cady, and locally important personages such as John Henry Stephens, Maria Ferdon and David Wark.

Section 54(A)(4) recognizes the importance of buildings “That embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; that represent the work of a master; that possess high artistic values; or that represent a significant distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.” Since the depot is built in the stick style, which is a relatively rare and specific American architectural style, it falls under this category as well.

Finally, Section 54(A)(5) recognizes buildings that “are otherwise of particular historic significance to the Borough of Closter by reflecting or exemplifying the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state, or community.” Closter’s railroad station building represents the significant economic, cultural and social changes brought by mass public transportation that expedited shipping and travel and allowed people to work outside of their small communities.

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Rockland County Journal

Tenafly Record

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www.northernbranchcorridor.com

www.wislew.com/nbstations

www.lib.umassd.edu

MAPS

1851 Northern Railroad Map

1861 Hopkins – Corey Map Center of Closter

1863 Walking Map of New York City and Vicinity

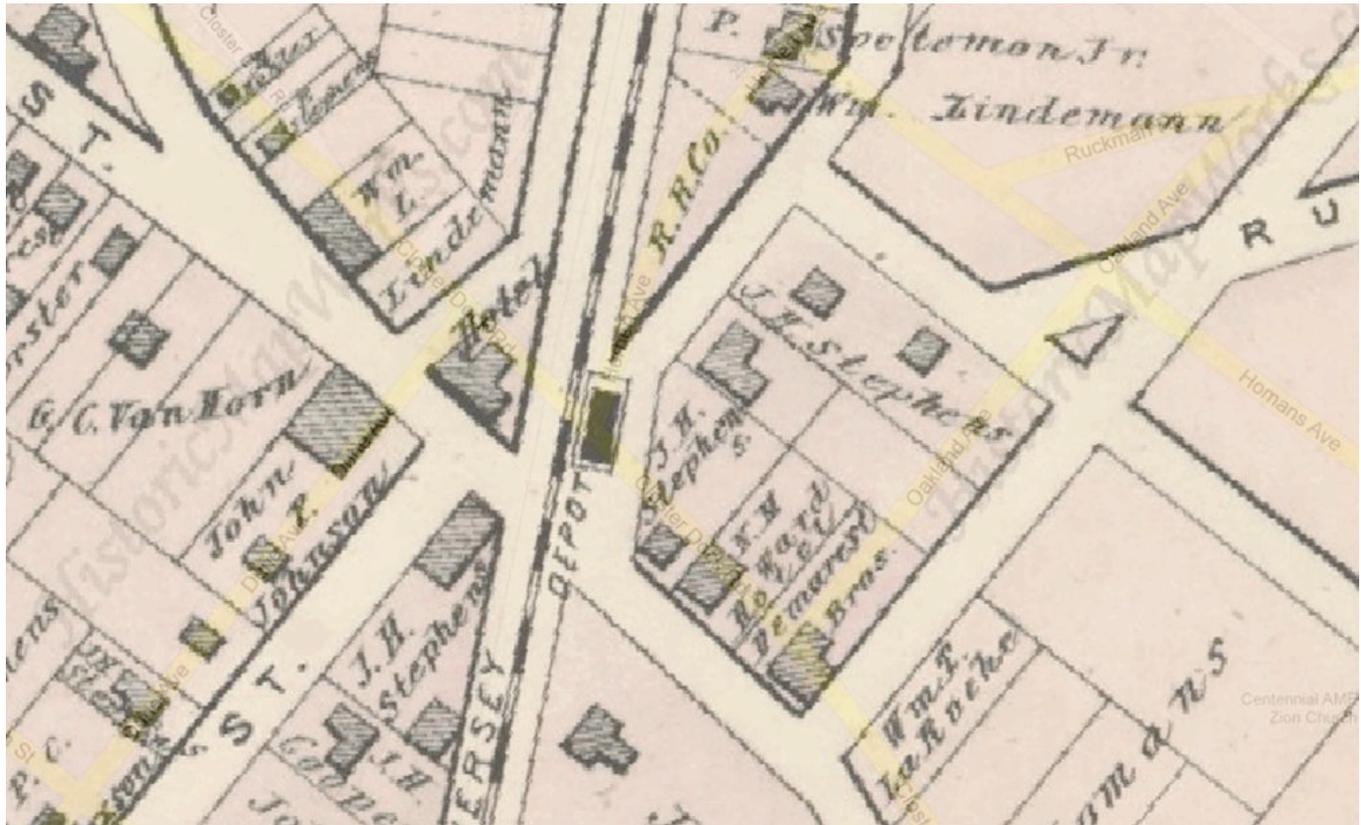
1876 Walkers Bergen County Atlas

1891 Beers Atlas of the Hudson Valley

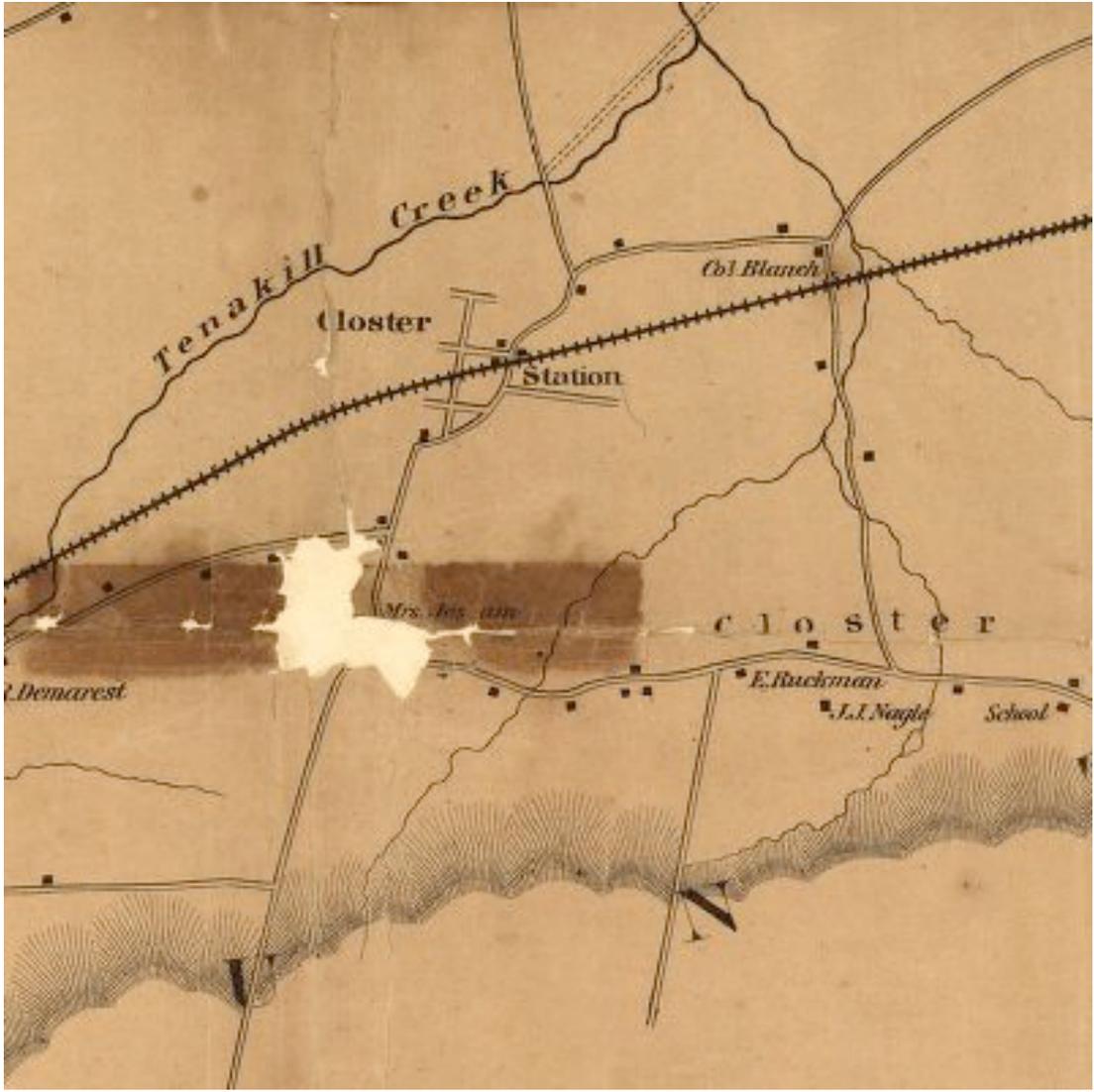
1912 Bromley Atlas

APPENDICES:

I. MAPS

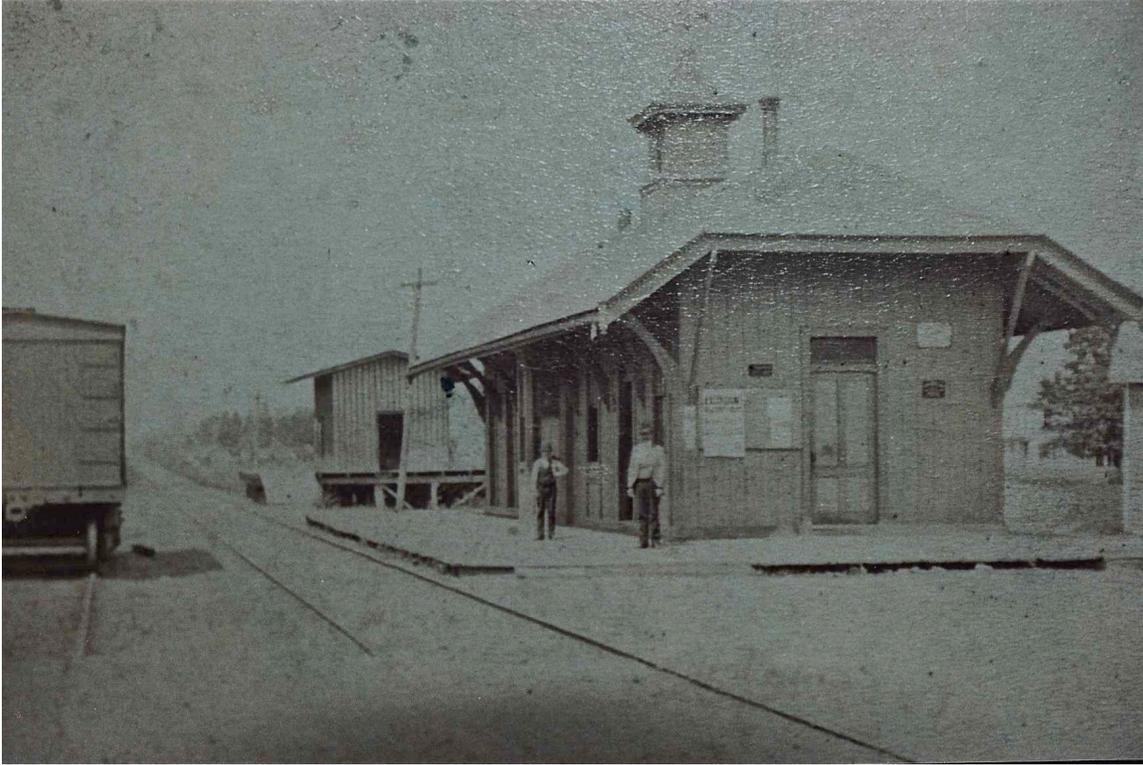


Map showing original location of Closter's railroad depot, in downtown Closter at what would now be the intersection of Herbert Avenue and Old Closter Dock Road

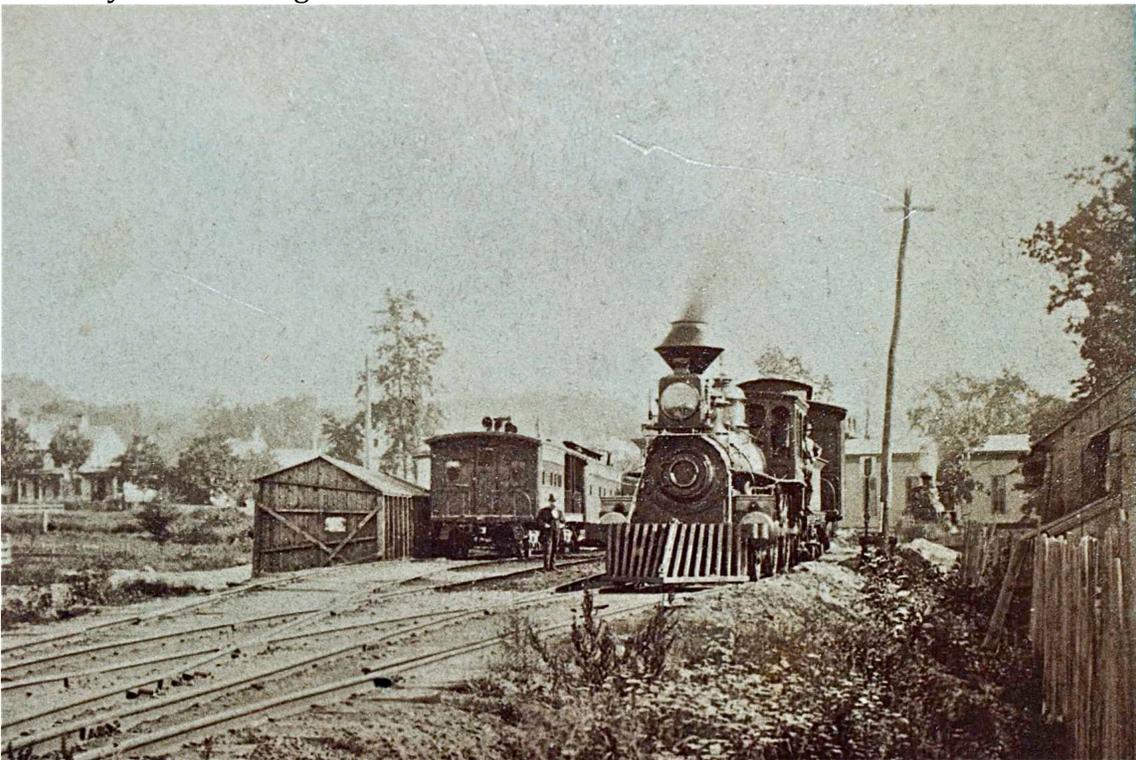


1859 Northern Railroad map showing the Closter Station

II. Historic Photos:



A very early photo of the Closter Depot, possibly in its original downtown location. Note that the porch does not yet exist, and the tower is smaller than in later photos. Courtesy of Mark Wright



Early photo of a Northern Railroad car with cow catcher. Courtesy Mark Wright



Interior photo, Northern Railroad Smoking Car. Courtesy Mark Wright



Early 20th Century photo of the depot, courtesy of Francesca Macchiavelli



M.P. 20.4
The CLOSTER station grounds were well kept. The building is unusual in having a bay window on the street side as well as one looking out on the track. The driver of the wagon in the foreground is protected — rain or shine.

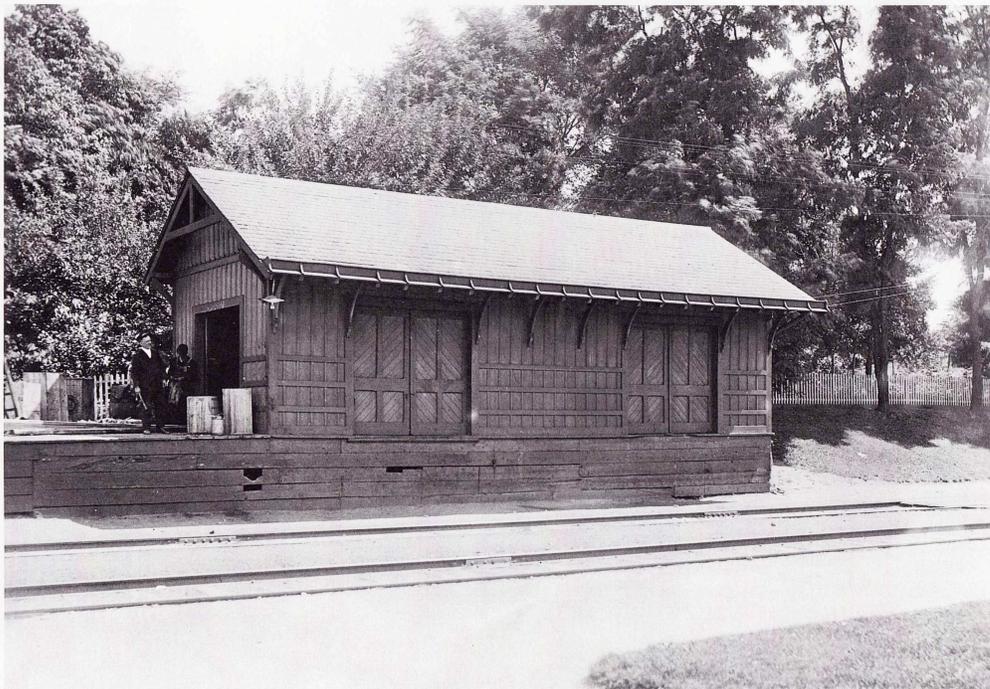
1910

1910 photo of depot from the northwest side – Railroadians of America



M.P. 20.4
 Train time at CLOSTER. In the 1900's John W. Ringling lived in Alpine and visited this station daily during the circus season to keep in telegraphic touch with his traveling sawdust empire. Ralph W. Tracy was the agent and telegrapher. The call was CO.

1910 photo of the Closter Depot as seen from the tracks. Railroadians of America



M.P. 20.4
 A single electric bulb will be noted hanging from the roof at the near corner of the CLOSTER freight house. The design is typical but the building is in better condition than most of the genre. The agent appears to be waiting impatiently for the local freight.

1910 photo of the freight house just north of the depot, on opposite side of tracks. This building still stands. Railroadians of America

II. Contemporary Photos



Depot building as seen from Station Court. Photo courtesy Bobbie Bouton Goldberg



Current (2012) photos of Depot seen from railroad and north side. Courtesy Bobbie Bouton Goldberg

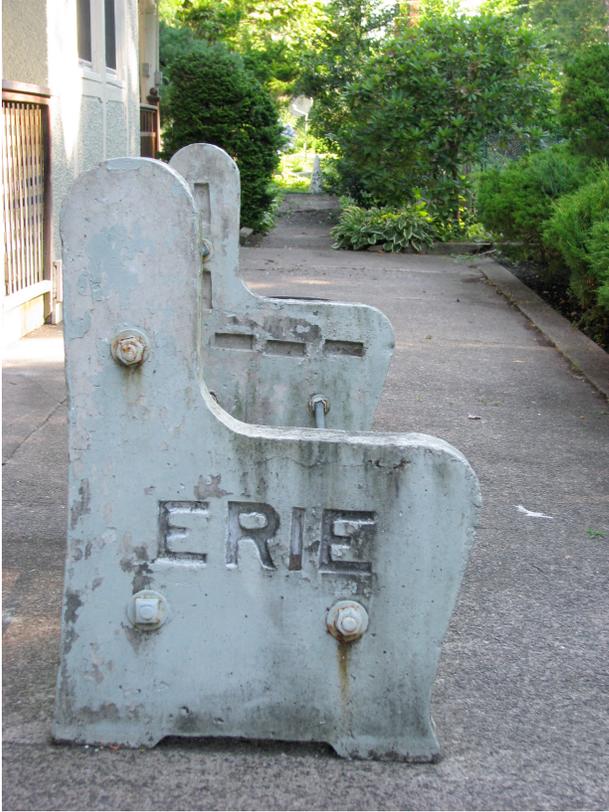


Photo taken in 2012 of bench alongside the tracks with "Erie" stamped into the concrete. Photo courtesy of Bobbie Bouton Goldberg