

ARCHAEOLOGY

Closter's cultural resources include archaeological ones – information found in the ground that adds to our understanding of the area's prehistory and history. People have inhabited New Jersey for at least 12,000 years. Archaeologists divide New Jersey's prehistory into three broad chronological periods: Paleo-Indian (±10,500-8000B.C.), Archaic (8000-1000 B.C.), and Woodland (1000 B.C. - 1600 A.D.). The earliest Paleo-Indian inhabitants probably initially hunted large Pleistocene animals such as mammoths, mastodon, and caribou. Many Pleistocene animals including the woolly mastodon were extinct by the end of the Paleo-Indian period. The types of stone tools used by the early people are a means of differentiating them. By the 17th century at the beginning of European contact, the Closter area was used by the Lenape. The Lenape were a Munsee-speaking native people, who like the area's earliest human inhabitants, lived primarily by foraging, although they did practice some horticulture.

HISTORY OF THE BOROUGH OF CLOSTER



Farmsteads remained an important part of Closter's landscape well into the 20th century. This circa 1905 photograph shows plowing in front of the Daniel De Clark House.

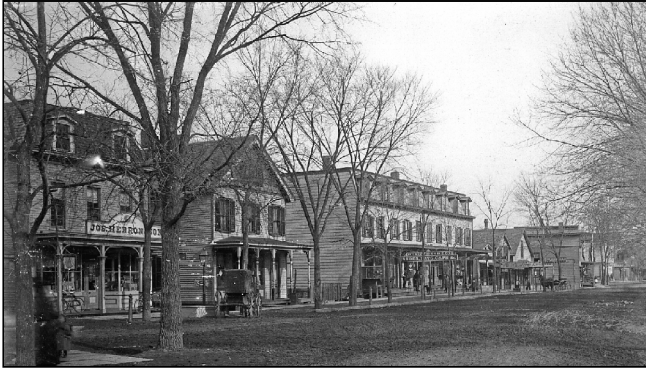
The first human occupants of the area that is now the Borough of Closter were prehistoric people and then the Lenape, a native people. Information about Closter's prehistory can still be found in the ground at archaeological sites.

Closter, located in the Northern Valley of Bergen County only 1 ½ miles from the Hudson River, is part of the area that was New Netherland from 1609 to 1664. Closter's settlement by European settlers did not begin until the late 17th and early 18th centuries. By 1800, the VerValen, Naugle, Auryansen, Durie, Ternure, Demaree, Van Horn, Westervelt, Huyler, Banta, Zabriskie, Montaque, Parsells, Jordan, and Cole families were farming in the area. Some of the early settlers had their origins in the Netherlands, but the roots of others were England, other European countries, and Africa. They were part of the multi-ethnic Dutch-American cultural group that settled in northern New Jersey and in New York and whose cultural presence long outlasted Dutch political control.

The settlement pattern in the Closter area until the mid-19th century was one of scattered farmsteads along or near early roads which today are Piermont Road, Closter Dock Road, West Street, Cedar Lane, Blanche Avenue, County Road, and Schraalenburgh Road. These early roads followed the curving contours of the land and led to landings on the Hudson River or were routes for inland communities to landings. Some farmsteads might serve as an inn or have an associated sawmill, gristmill, or blacksmith shop. The Dutch-American farmstead typically had a number of associated buildings, such as outkitchens, New World Dutch barns with distinctive H-bent frames, and hay barracks. While no New World Dutch barns or hay barracks survive in Closter, a number of the early houses retain later barns and other associated buildings which strengthen their connection to Closter's agrarian past.

From the late 18th century through much of the 19th century the area between Englewood and Tappan, New York, was called Closter. From 1775

until it was incorporated as a borough in 1904, Closter was part of the much larger Harrington Township which extended north to the New York State border, east to the Hudson River, west to the Hackensack River, and south to the Cresskill area.



Free-standing frame buildings with porches established the character of Closter's commercial area in the late 19th-century.

On May 26, 1859, when the first train went through Closter along the new tracks of the Northern Railroad Company linking Piermont, New York, with Jersey City, New Jersey, there was a sole commercial building—John Henry Stevens' general store erected in 1857—in what soon became the railroad suburb or village of Closter. With the location of the “Closter City” railroad stop at the intersection of Closter Dock Road and the tracks (in 1881, the station was relocated to its current site on Station Court), Stevens, William Lindemann, and others subdivided nearby land into rectangular lots with the narrow side facing the street, laid out streets, built houses in the popular architectural styles of the day, and promoted the community as a residential community for urban commuters. The Demarest brothers opened their hardware store in 1865. The store, located at 257-259 Closter Dock Road, is the oldest continuously operated business in the Borough.

By 1876, a railroad suburb had developed. A cluster of about 50 buildings, including houses, churches, a hotel, a school, a post office (established in 1861), and a number of businesses were within walking distance of the railroad station. The business area along Closter Dock Road became the major shopping area for the immediate region. While new subdivisions adopted a grid pattern, the presence of earlier curving roads provided Closter with its own distinctive

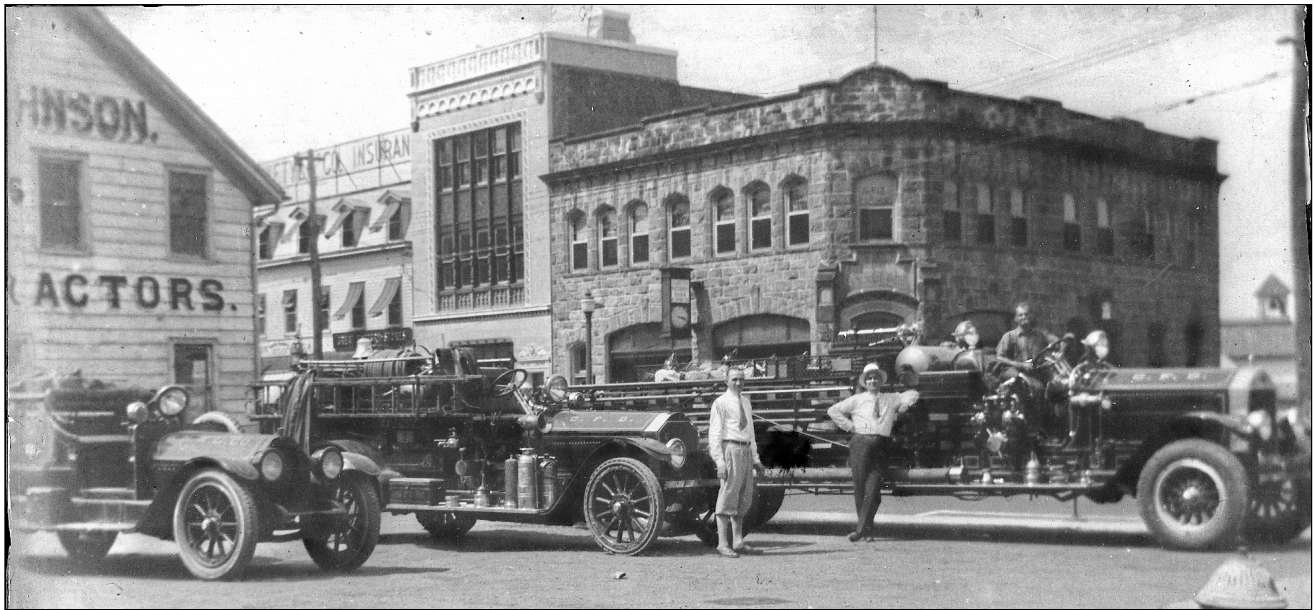
developmental pattern far removed from a standard grid. House lots, while small compared to the large properties of farmsteads, usually were large enough to accommodate a freestanding house, a barn or stable, other buildings, a front yard, and a rear vegetable garden. To a large degree, Closter's outlying areas retained their rural agricultural character. Large country homes of wealthy commuters, such as those around the crossing of Knickerbocker Road and Durie Avenue, joined the farmsteads. The proximity of the Randell (Harrington Park) station of the Jersey City-Albany (West Shore) Railroad provided a catalyst for housing development in the western section of the Borough.



This early 20th-century photograph of Demarest Avenue illustrates the typical residential developmental pattern in Closter's railroad suburb.

With the introduction of the Model T in 1908, automobiles became affordable for the middle class. Soon their availability would change the developmental pattern of many suburban communities, including Closter. The initial evolution of Closter from a railroad suburb to an automobile one was smooth, with the benefits provided by the automobiles coexisting with those of the trains. Residential areas near the railroad stations received infill buildings, on formerly vacant lots, while new sections further away were plotted. New houses reflected the styles and house-types popular at the dates they were built. Detached garages replaced barns and carriagehouses as accessory buildings.

Closter's downtown continued to thrive. Substantial new buildings were erected including the imposing stone Romanesque Revival style



Behind the fire trucks in this circa 1928 photograph are the stone National Bank of Closter building on the corner and the taller terra-cotta-faced structure which are among the substantial masonry commercial buildings erected in Closter's downtown during the first half of the 20th century.

Closter National Bank erected in 1913 and the terra-cotta faced, three-story building at 231 Closter Dock Road erected about 1928. At the turn-of-the-century, it was estimated that two-thirds of Closter's male residents commuted to New York City, presumably by train, but the influence of the car was beginning to be felt. Literature of 1903 promoting the community advertised that all streets were macadamized and that there were good roads to neighboring communities. Closter had 30 stores, 2 hotels, a fire department, churches, a new school built in 1900, and social clubs. In 1905, one year after incorporation as an independent borough, Closter was a thriving suburb with 1,272 residents living in 273 dwellings. The community still had ties to its agrarian past in the 7 farmers listed in the 1905 census, but the 67 professionals and 102 people involved in commerce show that the suburban character was dominant. In 1905, there were 51 African-American residents and this group had its own community with the Centennial A.M.E. Zion Church, built in 1896, as its focus.

Closter's population rose to 1,483 in 1910. In 1940, soon after its new Borough Hall was erected, the population had risen to 2,603. Growth had slowed during the Great Depression, but resumed after World War II, stimulated by the opening of the George Washington Bridge in 1931

and an expanding road system. (The Henry Hudson Drive between Fort Lee and Alpine was completed in 1926, US 9W was completed in the late 1920's, and the Palisades Interstate Parkway was completed in 1957.) By 1957, Closter only had three daily trains, down from 18 daily trains in 1903. Former farms and country estates made accessible by cars were subdivided for housing.

Initially, Closter's automobile subdivisions reflected the earlier layout patterns with grids placed along side the earlier roads. Later, the curving roads and cul-de-sacs characteristic of post World War II developments were employed, particularly in the eastern section of the Borough. In 1950, Closter had 3,376 residents. With steady construction of new housing, the population rose to 8,604 in 1970. In 1966, the supremacy of the car resulted in the termination of passenger rail service to Closter, although the Closter Historic District continues to retain the key characteristics of a railroad suburb.

The agrarian cultural landscape of the remaining early farmsteads has been more extensively altered. Most early houses have lost their large properties and large barns. Their cultivated fields now have houses and other suburban amenities. Fortunately, a few properties retain early barns and other accessory buildings.

The cultivated fields at Borough-owned MacBain and Buzzoni Farm Parks and the privately-owned Abram and David Demaree House remain as links to the agrarian past.

Early agrarian settlers had gristmills and sawmills. In the 19th century, Closter had small carriage and sleigh manufactories and the Closter Shading Company. However, industry was not a major developmental factor in the Borough until the 20th century. From 1918 until it closed in 1955, the U.S. Bronze Powder Works on Herbert Avenue was the largest employer in the Northern Valley. This factory produced explosives during World War II and later bronze and aluminum powders used for graphics and paints. The Acme Summit Mills, established in 1935, at one time employed 50 people and was located at 242 Closter Dock Road in a building now commercially-adaptively reused.

While most of the 20th century buildings in Closter are typical of suburban architecture reflecting popular architectural styles and types on the East Coast, one atypical house was erected in Closter. The Harold Hess House is a Lustron House, one of the only 4,498 porcelain-enameled steel, prefabricated houses manufactured in Ohio and erected at various sites in the United States between 1947 and 1950. While Closter's population in 2000 was 8,383, several hundred persons less than its peak population in 1970, the pace of new construction in Closter has not lessened. Family sizes are now smaller, while house sizes are typically much larger than during previous development phases. While some of the new construction is on previously undeveloped land, older buildings are

being demolished for new ones. Closter is included in the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of historic neighborhoods threatened by teardowns.

REFERENCES FOR THE HISTORY OF CLOSTER

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See also the "Resources for Understanding Closter's Architecture" in *Architecture in Closter*.

The Hess family in 1950 in front of their newly completed Lustron House. This property is listed on New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places.

