

# ***A Kid's History of Early Plainfield***

Presented by  
*The Plainfield Public Library*



## ***A Kid's History of Plainfield***

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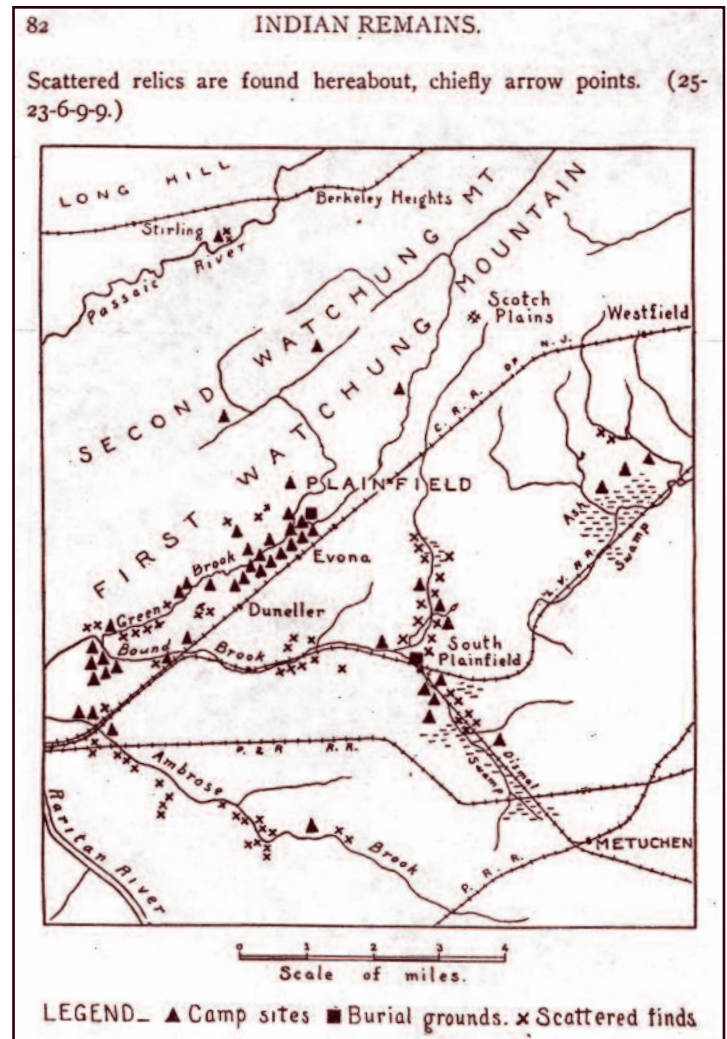
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# ***NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE PLAINFIELD AREA***

The Lenni-Lenape tribe is considered to be among the most ancient of the Northeastern Nations. Their tribal history goes back over 10,000 years. The name "Lenni-Lenape" means "Original People." Several Lenni-Lenape trails ran through Plainfield. The main path ran along Front Street, between the Hudson River and Delaware River.

Another path was along Woodland Avenue. It was the path the Lenni-Lenape took to get to the shore, where they found shellfish and seafood. A third trail ran through what is now the Watchung Circle down Park Avenue to Arlington Avenue, then down Kenyon Avenue and on to the shore.

Early relics have been found near Myrtle and Clinton Avenues, and one of their camping grounds was in the Crescent Avenue area. An ancient camp was found near the site of the Drake House, along the Green Brook. Burial grounds were also found in the Green Brook area.

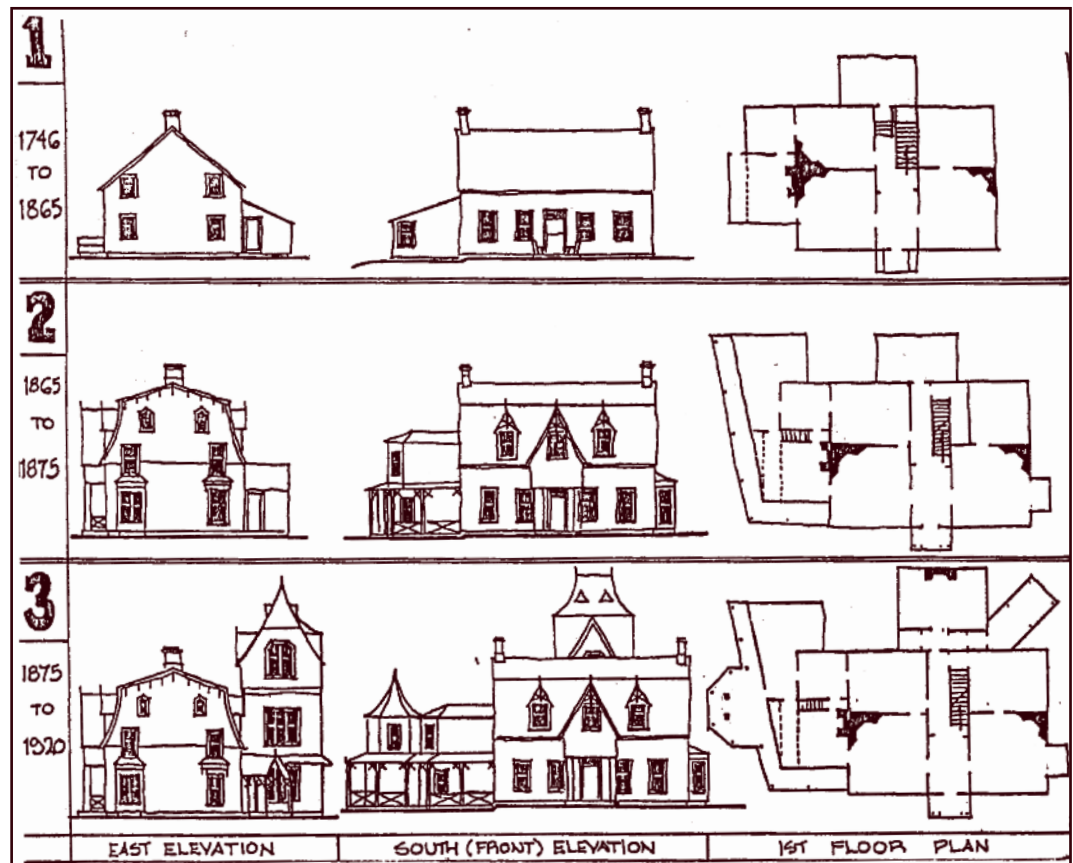


# SETTLERS COME TO PLAINFIELD

Many of Plainfield's early settlers came from Europe or New England. There were eight Scottish farmers who had large farms along the Green Brook.

In the 1700s, Plainfield was called *Milltown*, for there was a big mill on the south side of the Green Brook near Somerset Street. Plainfield was also called *Pinch Gut* because the town has a long, skinny shape, pinched in the middle. Plainfield was a part of Scotch Plains and all mail was delivered to Scotch Plains by stage coach and then on to Plainfield. In those times there was only a general store and an Indian trading post on Somerset Street for the local settlers to buy supplies.

The Drake House,  
and how it grew.  
Drawn by  
Frederic C. Detwiller





# THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

In 1776-77, colonial soldiers were being stopped and so they burned houses and stationed in Plainfield, and General George Washington is believed to have stayed at the home of the Drake family on Front Street.

This house is now *The Drake House Museum*. A famous battle was fought in the Plainfield area in June, 1777. It is called *The Battle of the Short Hills*.

The British were going from New York to attack Philadelphia, the nation's capital at that time. They planned to go through Plainfield to fight George Washington and his troops. American colonial soldiers fought them along what is now known as Woodland Avenue near Oak Tree Road. The British soldiers were unable to get past the American patriots, nor could they capture General Washington at his lookout in the Watchung Hills. The British were mad about

being stopped and so they burned houses and looted all the way to Staten Island.

The site of the American colonial soldiers' camp, called the Blue Hills Fort and Encampment, was located in what is now Green Brook Park.



Many African American families living in Plainfield can trace their beginnings back to the times when Plainfield was farmland. Slavery did exist in early Plainfield, but by 1850, of the African Americans living here (53

men and 54 women) there were no male slaves and one female slave. A man named Caesar, who had been born in Africa, worked for the Drake family in the 1700s and was freed by them in 1769. He helped the American colonists fight the Battle of the Short Hills by making sure they had provisions.

# FROM FARMS TO SHOPS

After the Revolutionary War, Plainfield was still mostly farms. One of those farms is now Hillside Cemetery on Woodland Avenue. A man named Alexander Gilbert, who served as Plainfield's mayor from 1891 until 1896, bought land that was very hilly. People laughed at him and said "You cannot farm that land!", so he and his friends decided to make it a cemetery.



In the summertime, Plainfield was beautiful, but in spring and fall, the rains turned the city into a mudhole. Children swept mud from crosswalks to earn money.

Plainfield began to change from a farming community to a city. In 1808 the first hat shop was built on Front Street near Grant Avenue, and soon Plainfield was well-known for hat-making. In 1837, there were fifteen hat shops in Plainfield. At that time, there were also six tailoring shops, six dry goods shops, one grocery store, one tanyard, one fire insurance company, one lawyer, three doctors, and five churches.

Alexander Gilbert

# A GOOD PLACE TO LIVE

In 1834, Plainfield was described as a good place to live, close to New York City. A New York doctor told his patients to go to Plainfield because it was a healthy place to live. Many families began to move here, many cultural and artistic activities began, and many churches were built.

Religion was important to the people of Plainfield. Church members were active in improving Plainfield in many ways. Getting Muhlenberg Hospital built in town is an example of how people worked for their city. Plainfield was called a "City of Churches" as many houses of worship were built within the city in the 1800s. Many of them still stand today and are considered to be historic structures.

The earliest house of worship in the Plainfield area was the Quaker Meeting House, which was built in 1736 on Woodland Avenue. That building was taken down in 1788, and a new Quaker Meeting House was built that same year on Watchung Avenue near the Green Brook.



The Quaker Meeting House

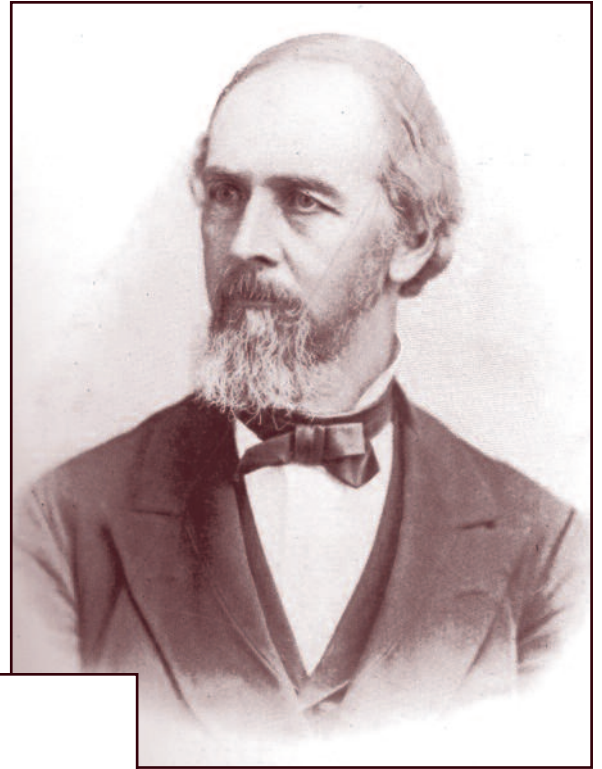


Tiers Pond



# EDUCATION

Education was important to the early Plainfielders. Dr. Charles Stillman opened two schools in Plainfield in 1847 - one was in a hat shop; the other was in a cabinet shop. The first free public school building in Plainfield was built in 1848. The Whittier School, shown below, was converted from a church to a school in 1896. It is still standing at 504 Madison Avenue.



Charles Stillman M.D.

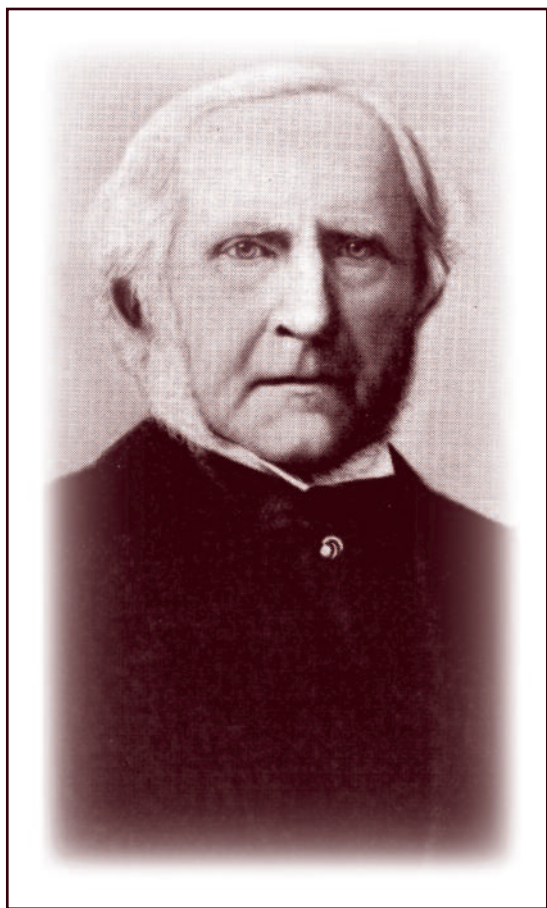


The Whittier School



# ***A PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR PLAINFIELD***

**JOB MALE** was the first mayor of Plainfield. He was elected in 1869 and served four terms. He was a strong believer that the citizens of Plainfield should have a public library. Through his influence the City Council voted in 1881 to establish the Plainfield Public



Job Male

Library and Reading Room. About one year later, the library was opened in a room on the second floor of a building on the corner of Eighth Street & Park Avenue. Job Male built the town's first library building in 1886 and donated it with the land to library officials. It was called "The Job Male Public Library, Art Gallery and Museum".



The Job Male Public Library, Art Gallery and Museum

# TRANSPORTATION

Since colonial times a stage coach line went through Plainfield on the Old York Road. It was known as *The Swift Sure Mail Line*, and it carried people to Elizabethport. Passengers headed for New York were transferred to a steamboat.

In 1839, the rail line was finally completed, making it easier for people to reach Plainfield. More people began to move to Plainfield once they could conveniently travel into Newark or Elizabeth. In 1874 the tracks through Plainfield were elevated, because so many trains were running through town each day.

People got around Plainfield on foot, by horse, by horse & buggy, and by bicycle. Trolleys began to run in 1892, and the city was now connected by the Plainfield Trolley Company.

The "horseless carriage" (the automobile) appeared in 1899. In 1902 there were two car dealers, and automobile parades became a popular entertainment. In 1903 an automobile cost between \$300 and \$700.





# ***PLAINFIELD BECOMES A CITY***

Plainfield became a city in 1869 and continued to grow as people moved here and built homes. Sometimes they built businesses here, too. By the end of the 1800s, Plainfield had added to its businesses with 5 banks, 5 newspapers, 5 hotels, 18 grocery stores, 14 butchers, 7 grain stores, 13 bakeries, 5 fish stores, 13 real estate dealers, 4 architects, 109 carpenters, 21 blacksmiths, 56 painters and 11 plumbers, 2 ice cream stores and a traveling ice cream truck.

Plainfield had changed from a farm village into a suburb of beautiful houses and successful businesses. Plainfield has been home to people from many different countries and from diverse backgrounds.



Downtown Plainfield

## ***MORE FAMOUS PLAINFIELD PEOPLE***

**JAMES MARTINE**, was born in 1849 and moved to Plainfield nine years later. The family owned Cedar Brook Farm, which was built in the early 1700s. When his father died, James had to leave school to manage the farm. He was only 14 years old. As he grew up he became involved in politics and served as State Assemblyman in the 1870s and 1880s. Martine was known as the “Farmer Orator”, because he was a good public speaker but always referred to himself as a farmer.

**ELVIRA KENYON**, was known as the First Lady of Plainfield. Born in 1835, she ran the Plainfield Seminary which faced Arlington Avenue next to the Park Hotel. It was the center of culture for Plainfield in Civil War times. She also was the first president of the women’s auxiliary of Muhlenberg Hospital.

**PETER WYCKOFF**, was a local African American businessman who helped establish Mount Olive Baptist Church in 1870. Mr. Wyckoff had a successful broom-making business. His father, Francis, had been a businessman, too.



Elvira Kenyon



# ***PLAINFIELD FIRSTS***

- The Plainfield Gas Light Company was organized in 1857, and the first street lamps were installed in 1872.
- The Plainfield Fire Department was started in 1827.
- The First National Bank of Plainfield, founded in 1863, was the city's first bank.
- The first African American to cast a vote was Thomas Smith who voted on April 12, 1870.
- The first police chief was T.J. Gillies, who was hired on June 24, 1870. His salary was \$600 a year.
- The Plainfield Electric Light Company began in 1886, and the first house wired for electricity was at 912 Central Avenue.
- The Stillman Music Hall, at 215 West Front Street, was the city's first theater. It opened in 1884.



Early Fire Vehicles

# ***A GLOSSARY OF OLD-FASHIONED WORDS***

***Colonial:*** in America, the time between the early 1600s and 1776.

***Blacksmith:*** a craftsman who heated metal over a charcoal fire, making horseshoes, farm tools, and things such as nails to make a house or a barn.

***Dry Goods Shop:*** a store that sold flour, sugar, salt, coffee, cloth, thread, lace, and other household items.

***General Store:*** a grocery store that sold many products for the home such as cloth, shoes, cooking pots, and candleholders.

***Grain Store:*** a store that sold food for farm animals.

***Mudhole:*** a very muddy place

***Tanyard:*** a place of work where animal skins were smoothed  
(***also call a tanner***) and cured until they became leather for shoes, boots, or saddles.

# ***HISTORICAL ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS***

1. Draw a map of your "trails" to school, to the public library, and to the park. Can you find another "trail" to return home?



2. Visit the Trailside Museum in Mountainside to see Indian relics.
3. Find out about the history of your school's name.
4. Make a list of all the types of stores you've seen in Plainfield.
5. Visit the Plainfield Public Library to see the life-size painting of Job Male.

6. Visit the site of the Blue Hills Fort and Encampment in Green Brook Park.
7. Visit Washington Rock in Green Brook, the lookout point for George Washington.
8. Visit the Drake House Museum on West Front Street.



## A Kid's History of Plainfield

is based upon the following books:

- *History of Plainfield*, by F.T. Smiley
- *History of Plainfield*, by Howard Lapsley
- *Historic Tour of Plainfield, N.J.*
- *Plainfield's African-American: From Northern Slavery to Church Freedom*, by Leonard Bethel and Frederick Johnson
- *Indian Remains Near Plainfield, Union County And Along The Lower Delaware Valley*, by Leslie Spier
- *Plainfield, 300 Years*
- *History of Plainfield*, by the Courier News

...and many other  
wonderful sources available at  
the Plainfield Public Library

