



JOHN HENRY STEVENS -- The Unheralded "Father of Closter"

In the long history of Closter there is one man who has a central role in literally building, promoting and developing the town and yet remains largely unknown and unacknowledged by posterity. I am speaking of the multi-tasking, fiercely ambitious 19th century man John Henry Stephens (1831-1887) a builder, developer, realtor, architect, first postmaster and station agent who was called the "The Father of Closter". In a 1954 Bergen Review article, (now defunct local paper) an "elderly citizen" is quoted as stating, "John Stephens started this town". A family genealogical history published in 1900 lauds him as "the promoter and leading spirit of the village, the father of Closter".

The importance of Stephens was in the fortuitous meeting of the man and the moment, in this case 1857, when Stephens came to Closter. Born in NYC, he was the son of carpenter James H. Stephens, an enterprising entrepreneur in his own right. The elder Stephens taught this son the carpentry and building trades. When Stephens came to Closter he built the first commercial building in what was to become the "downtown" area. It was a mixed use general store/post office corner structure of Italianate style with broad porches on two sides, a large cupola and built on the site now occupied by the Closter Bootery building. In fact the Stephens general store building was only torn down in 1957 to permit construction of the Closter Bootery building, an aluminum and glass international style building now slathered in stucco.

In 1857 Stephens had recognized the opportunity and change that was about to engulf Closter with the coming of the Northern Railroad which connected NYC to Piermont. Stephens was a shrewd land speculator who literally helped draw up the map for the downtown street layout.

Prior to the intrusion of the railroad, Closter City as it was grandly known, was a sleepy rural community of several hundred residents. The opening of the railroad quickly changed all that. It triggered a land boom that was to be sustained through the entire frenetic Civil War decade. New homes sprung up by dozens on lots near the railroad. The new rail network quickly transformed Closter City into a trading leader, the "hub" of the Northern Valley. Commenting on the boom, attorney David Ackerman said, "As soon as the railroad was completed...homes immediately sprang up on all sides. It resembled in no small way the establishment of some western town during the rush for gold".

At this time townspeople decided to build their own church in town. Stephens was instrumental in this project and designed the simple building at West and High Streets which was dedicated in 1862 as the Protestant Reformed Dutch Church of Closter City.

Stephens designed his own home on 5 acres at Durie and Knickerbocker Roads (now Maycock Court). The house was a picturesque gabled, dormered and square towered Victorian with multiple porches that was gracefully set back from the corner intersection. It was intentionally set afire as a fire department exercise in April 1961. A companion building, also designed by Stephens, the Serviss House, built for the

well known surveyor, still remains across the street and it shares many common design elements the Stephen House had.

Stephens has three children with his wife Rachel nee Huyler. They were James H., Eugene and Percy. John Henry Stephens lived the remainder of his life in Closter serving 25 years as a rail station agent and postmaster for 30 years. He died in Closter on September 8, 1887, and

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John Henry Stevens



*John Henry Stevens' Residence
Durie and Knickerbocker Road - circa 1860*

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To read about Closter's history, see old photographs, read our Design Guidelines for historic buildings, and more!!

The Closter Historical Society: 243 West Street, Closter, NJ 07624 • 201-784-1566

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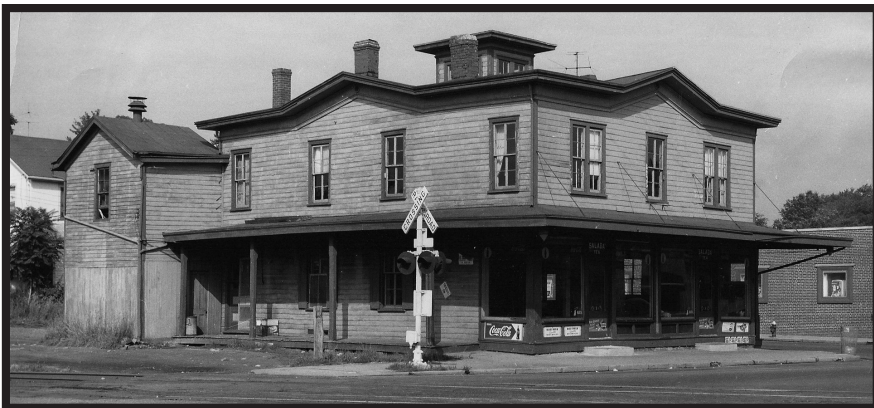
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while having made an indelible imprint on Closter he has been essentially forgotten in the rush of time. His son Percy born in 1873 lived here in Closter until 1963. He was a common site walking about Closter; I never saw him drive his car. He would often stop and linger at the fence to watch the boys play baseball at Knickerbocker Road; (now Mollicone Park) I know this because I was one of those boys. I never heard him speak, but he often had an enigmatic smile on his face. This was a man who was born in the horse and buggy era and died in the jet age around the time of John F. Kennedy's awful passing, the last vestige of the Stephens family in Closter.

DOUGLAS RADICK



Ms. Stevens and Marion (Niece)



Stephens General Store 1958 with Morse's Pharmacy at rear

From The First Hundred Years: A History of the Reforms Church of Closter

John H. Stephens

A tin box and a hat were the first depot and post office in Closter, as may be seen from the following railroad handbook excerpt:

“When the railroad was first completed there was not a building within half a mile of the station which then consisted of a tin box containing the tickets and money, placed upon the rail fence in the swamp, watched over and guarded by John H. Stephens, who, through his energy, has done more to build up the town than any other man. The post office at that time was contained in his hat.”

“When from his perch upon the fence he descried a mortal wandering through the labyrinths of the swamp he hailed them, and if they desired to travel to any point he would consult the little tin box and send them on their way rejoicing; or if they were desirous of hearing from distant friends he would dive into the mysteries of Uncle Sam’s mail, as contained in the aforesaid hat, and if possible supply them with the looked for letter, or furnish them with portraits of Washington, printed in red, at three cents each.”

Closter Historical Society Registration Form

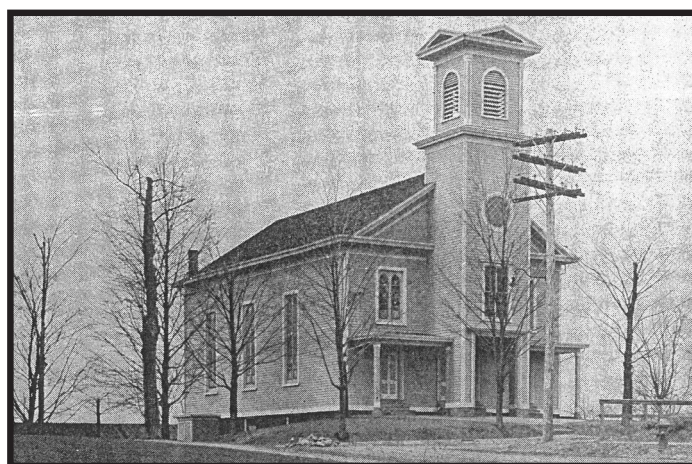
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The Reformed Church of Closter at the turn of the century. At the lower left can be seen the tops of the carriage sheds which were built in the area now occupied by the O.J. Hogan Memorial Wing.