

Old picture post card of Emerson, looking east toward Emerson Hotel and Linwood School.

Emerson: A Brief History

Beginnings

We take for granted what Emerson is today - a bustling community of over 7,000 residents, with modern roadways, our own public school system and retail establishments that cater to our many needs. But we didn't get that way overnight, and our community's foundations were laid long before we were incorporated as a borough in 1903.

Prior to the first non-native settlers, what is today Emerson was part of a tribal territory of Lenape Indians. Since there's no written record of their activity, we cannot be sure how intensively they used the land – whether they made settlements here or just passed through. But we are reminded of their presence by Kinderkamack Road, which gets its name from a Lenape word for the local area. Though the true meaning of Kinderkamack has been debated for many years, most historians now agree that it should be translated as “upland”, a reference to the prominent ridge that extends from western Emerson south to River Edge.

Of course there was no “Emerson” when the first non-native settlers came to this region. The area was known by two unofficial names, the aforementioned Kinderkamack

on the west, which included parts of present-day Oradell and River Edge, and Old Hook on the east, the “hook” from a Dutch word meaning “angle” or “corner”. That angle of land was delineated by three connecting water courses – the Hackensack River, the Pascack Brook and the Musquapsink Brook. Today it includes not only Emerson, but parts of Westwood and Harrington Park.

Perhaps the first to make his home and farm in the Old Hook area of present-day Emerson was William Rutan, who settled on a parcel of land just west of today’s Old Hook Farm sometime around 1748. Not long thereafter Abraham Hopper purchased a tract of 90-plus acres along Kinderkamack Road, then a narrow dirt lane through what was mostly woodland; the house he built still exists, although substantially enlarged and remodeled.

Throughout the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century, the communities of Kinderkamack and Old Hook were rural and agricultural, almost entirely populated by the Jersey Dutch. Despite the name, not all were ethnically Dutch; many, like the Demarests, DeBauns and Loziers, were French, and one prominent family, the Zabriskies, was Polish. But they shared a common culture and the Dutch Reformed religion, and their large fields of corn or wheat, their huge Dutch barns, and their farmhouses, made of sandstone or wood frame construction, dominated the local landscape.



The Abraham Hopper home on Kinderkamack Road, circa 1910.

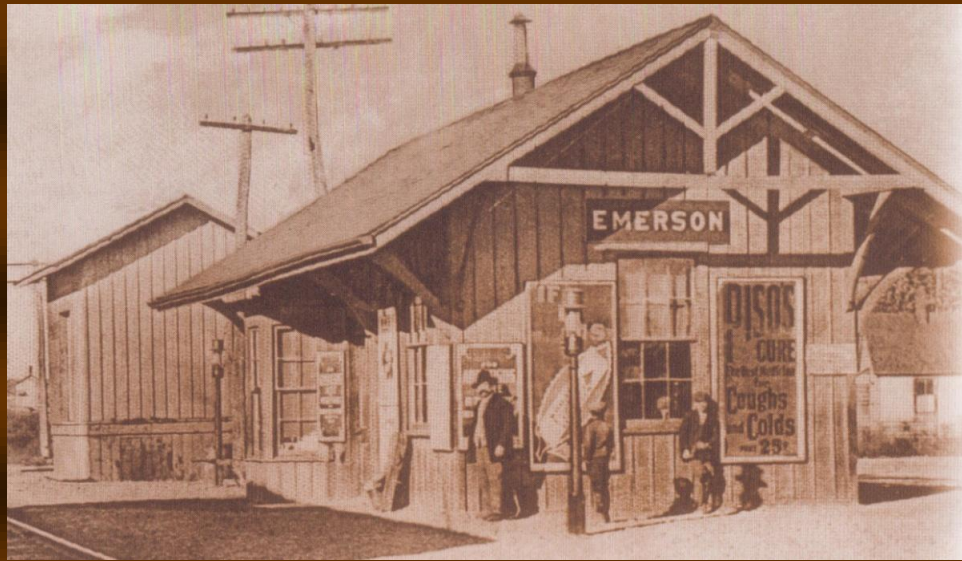
The Railroad and Early Development

In 1869, the Hackensack and New York Extension Railroad laid tracks from the existing terminus in North Hackensack to a new terminus in Hillsdale. With noisy locomotives chugging through town several times a day, the quiet rural life that characterized Kinderkamack became a thing of the past. Local communities built depots along the line, including one here sometime between 1870 and 1872, which still remains in the center of town. Unlike other locales along the route, new homes did not spring up quickly in Kinderkamack. Other than a small subdivision just east of Kinderkamack Road, laid out in 1871, residential development would lag for another twenty years. But the train station sparked the beginning of what would become Emerson's downtown business district.

In the early 1870s, John H. Ackerman opened Kinderkamack's first general store near the corner of Linwood Avenue and Kinderkamack Road. At about the same time, George W. Wallace built the Etna House, so-called for the new community name that was quickly replacing the old-fashioned sounding Kinderkamack. Later purchased by August Block, and referred to as Block's Hotel (or Block's Hall) it remains a landmark in downtown Emerson and has long been known as the Emerson Hotel.

In 1891, a New York based development firm proposed the first significant residential subdivision in Etna. In that year, the New York and New Jersey Investment Company filed a subdivision application for a large tract of former Demarest family land, west of Kinderkamack Road and south of present day Ackerman Avenue. Two more major subdivisions followed, by the same company – one, in 1892, in the section of town bordered by Main Street on the south and Jefferson Avenue on the north, and another, in 1894, in the mostly low-lying area between Main Street and Randolph Avenue, fondly known in the local vernacular as "Frogtown."

The community of Kinderkamack-Etna changed drastically in the thirty years following the appearance of the railroad. The Jersey Dutch culture was disappearing, as the New York and New Jersey Investment Company aggressively marketed the new subdivision lots to immigrant families, especially those from Germany or Italy. In the early part of the next century, the first two community churches would be built, both on Linwood Avenue – the Union Chapel Church, in 1900, to serve the German Protestant residents, and the Assumption Parish, in 1905, which would provide a place of worship for the large and growing Italian Catholic population.



Emerson train station, circa 1909 or later.

Creation of a Borough

In 1903, the “boroughitis” epidemic that swept through New Jersey in 1894 finally reached Etna. On April 8, 1903, the community that had been part of greater Washington Township became incorporated as the Borough of Etna. On April 28, in an election held in Block’s Hotel, the young municipality chose its first council and its first mayor, Charles J. Miller. But the “Borough of Etna” would be short-lived; just six years later the new governing body would vote to rechristen the borough as “Emerson”.

The community’s new name wasn’t the only change. In the early part of the twentieth century, the Hackensack Water Company made plans to dam and widen the Hackensack River to create a new reservoir. After a small impoundment was built in Oradell in 1902, the company made larger expansions north into Emerson in 1912 and 1921. The Oradell Reservoir helped meet the growing demand for a clean and dependable water supply; but it also permanently altered the terrain of eastern Emerson. Many of the old homes in this section of town were demolished to make way for the reservoir and its buffer lands, including the old Flats Road neighborhood of farms that had existed since the 1830s.

By the beginning of World War II, little was left of the community that existed when the railroad arrived. Most of the founding Jersey Dutch families were gone, replaced by the German Americans and, in even larger numbers, by the Italian Americans who purchased lots which once were farmland. Some of these new immigrants and many of

their children and grandchildren became active members of Emerson's business, social and political communities. Kinderkamack Road, like other main thoroughfares, was paved, and a growing downtown business district replaced the old rural hamlet of large family farms.



Block's Hotel (now the Emerson Hotel), circa 1903.

Post World War II and the Modern Suburb

Like other suburban communities, Emerson experienced an explosion of development and new residents after World War II. In 1950, the population of the borough was 1,744; just ten years later it boomed to 6,819 – an increase of nearly 300%. Modest and affordable homes attracted young couples, including veterans who were eager to return to a settled, civilian life. Many were from outside the community, often from the boroughs of New York City, bringing fresh ideas and a new ethnic diversity to Emerson.

By the late 1940s, construction was moving at an unprecedented rate. Developers like Emwood Builders were putting up homes in the area of Lincoln Boulevard. On the east side of town, a 19 home development was built on Orchard Avenue; 30 homes, known as Lakewood Estates, were constructed off of Main Street; and a 60 home development, called Emerson Knolls, was built off of High Street, all in a short period of

time. Back on the west side of town, Sterling Developers built a substantial development of 220 houses at the far northern end of Hasbrouck Avenue. And, in 1953, the Eagle Construction Company began a large development of ranch houses, known as Continental Woods, in the swampy and forested area that had been a favored hunting ground of Emerson's old timers.

More residents also meant an increased demand for goods and services. In 1957, the Pascack Valley Shopping Center was built on the site of the 150 year old Van Wagoner homestead on Kinderkamack Road, which was demolished the previous year. Some twenty or so years later, another shopping center, the Shop Rite supermarket on Main Street, replaced the old Heck home and farm, which had occupied the property since 1869.

In the years since, Emerson has continued to grow into the modern suburban town it is today. But we wouldn't be here without the hard work of those who came before us – the Jersey Dutch who cleared the forests for home and farm; the immigrant families, of Italian, German or other ethnic heritage, who turned a sparsely populated, rural outpost into a thriving community. We don't know what lies ahead for Emerson, but we can be sure of one thing – we've inherited a rich legacy that should never be forgotten.