

A Tale of Two Communities

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Although Westfield seemed to welcome the modern convenience of the railroad, which allowed the town's inhabitants to commute to New York City, according to "Know Your Town," published by the League of Women Voters in 1972, the villagers at the base of the Watchung Mountains were very resistant to this "smoking monstrosity" intruding on their rural and rustic way of life. The villagers of Scotch Plains would not permit the railroad to purchase land and run the tracks through the area's pristine fields for another 50 years.

As a result of differing community goals and interests, the Township of Fanwood declared its independence from Westfield Township in 1877. The Village of Scotch Plains was included within the borders of Fanwood Township.

There are several conflicting accounts as to why Fanwood was named as such, and not named Scotch Plains. By one historical account, in "Under the Blue Hills," the Central Jersey Railroad eventually managed to lay tracks and establish a depot in Fanwood Township after years of protests from the villagers.

Irked by the villagers and what they perceived as their resistance to progress, the railroad took its revenge, and instead of calling the new depot "Scotch Plains," after the village, they named the depot after the daughter of the President of the railroad, "Fanny," according to "Under the Blue Hills." The account bolsters the legend of "Fanny Wood," for whom the community was reportedly named.

This "spurned some bad blood," according to "Under the Blue Hills," between the fledgling settlement, which began to grow up around the new depot on Midway Avenue, and the conservative Scotch Plains villagers at the foot of the mountain.

Excerpts from the book, "Fanwood Fire Company & Borough of Fanwood," (1990), written by the Fanwood Volunteer Firefighters, states that the Jersey Central Railroad, in coalition with the Central Jersey Land Improvements Company, headed by wealthy Fanwood land owners, bought one and a quarter square miles of land off Martine Avenue. This small stretch of land is what eventually became Fanwood Borough in 1895.

This land included 350 acres near the tracks, which it dubbed "Fanwood Park," and relocated the railroad tracks from Midway Avenue to North Avenue. The railroad company opened the farmland up to developers, businesses and prospective home buyers.

In "Under the Blue Hills," Mrs. Rawson relates that the settlers around the depot imagined themselves to be more sophisticated than the (Scotch Plains) villagers, whom they regarded as less "progressive," according to the author. The depot residents landscaped the grounds around the railroad station by bringing in large evergreens, so that when travelers on the train passed through, they would get the impression of a sophisticated and modern people.

The creators of this park-like garden setting felt that the entire road, then known as Darby Road, was deserving of a more distinguished and elegant name, and so changed it to Park Avenue. The Scotch Plains villagers did not approve.

According to "Fanwood Fire Company & Borough of Fanwood," the two opposing factions in Fanwood Township fought over other issues, as well. The residents who lived



Courtesy of Scotch Plains-Fanwood Historical Society

THE WAY IT WAS...Stores along South Avenue in Fanwood circa 1940. The business district, has grown in the past five decades and is a lively hub of activity.

near the train station were angry with the Township because the Municipal Council refused to put street lights and road improvements into their neighborhood. They also felt that the Township was not being fair in distributing liquor licenses.

A meeting was held and nine men formed the Independent Citizens Club. The idea of forming a separate borough was considered and debated for two years before it became a reality in 1895.

Shortly after the Borough of Fanwood was formed, the railroad built six houses along the tracks and funded the building of the Volunteer Fire Company and the Post Office in 1897. Workers from Kearny's Western Electric plant and commuters from other towns moved into Fanwood and settled near the railroad station.

By the early 1900s, Fanwood was known as a health resort where wealthy tourists spent their vacations. The Fanwood Athletic Club, sponsored by the Central Jersey Land Improvement Company, was built on South Avenue, and numerous stores and hotels also sprang up along South and Martine Avenues at this time.

The railroad constructed coal and lumber yards along the tracks, and the Central Jersey Land Improvement Company funded many other business ventures, such as a blacksmith shop and the library.

Like Fanwood Borough, other local communities were formed over similar conflicts with their hometown governments. The farmers in the hills of northern Westfield were growing increasingly dissatisfied with the Township of Westfield, dominated by new residents and new interests. Preferring their simple way of life, they separated from Westfield in 1895 to form the Borough of Mountainside.

The two Fanwoods, Fanwood Township and the newly formed Fanwood Borough, existed side-by-side until 1917, when Fanwood Township reacquired its original colonial name and returned to being Scotch Plains, as recalled in "Under the Blue Hills."

By the late 1880s, according to "Clayton's History of Union County," Scotch Plains was home to three churches, two taverns, three grocery stores, a dry goods store, a paper factory, a drugstore, a shoemaker, two butchers and the Scotch Plains Library, which was established in 1888. By the time a census was taken in 1900, the population of Scotch Plains had reached 1,200.

Concurrent with World War I, there was a large influx of skilled laborers of Italian descent who came to New Jersey and opened shoemaking, tailoring, carpentry, masonry and plumbing businesses. As paved streets replaced dirt roads, and especially with the construction of Route 22 in 1930, the town grew.

Schools, churches and more stores sprang up, as people from the city began relocating to the community, which was considered moving to the country.

The biggest growth spurt, however, came during and immediately after World War II, as immigrants from many countries fled Europe and settled in the Central New Jersey area. In Scotch Plains, big housing developments replaced farms, and more schools were added to accommodate the population, which had escalated to more than 10,000 people by 1953.

This number dramatically jumped to 18,491 by 1960. The most recent census, in 1997, counted 22,000 residents, eight elementary schools, two junior high schools and one senior high school, serving 8,000 children in kindergarten through 12th grade.

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