

FACES OF YESTERDAY: John Isenmann – Bridge Builder

By Vic Bary

The next time you drive across a Rahway River bridge in Cranford, and it doesn't gently sway back and forth nor do you hear the slapping of wooden boards, give a silent "thank you" to John Isenmann. For it was Cranfordite Isenmann, during an 11-year tenancy starting in 1876 on the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders, who successfully fought to have our six wooden bridges across the Rahway River replaced with state of the art iron the bridges. So who was John Isenmann, a name few remember today?



John Isenmann

John Isenmann was born in Alsace-Lorraine Germany on February 1, 1843. When he was about 15 years old, he emigrated to New York City where he pursued the butcher's trade. During the New York City Civil War Draft riots of July, 1863, John saw military service as a sergeant in Company D, 1st Brigade, 1st Division of the New York National Guards. In 1867 John Isenmann relocated to Cranford, where it is cited by one source that his father already lived, while maintaining his butcher business in several stalls at the Washington Market in New York City.



Washington Market

Once in Cranford, John Eisenmann resided at 301 Springfield Avenue. The 1870 N. G. Foster map shows the site (running from the riverbank to Central Avenue) owned by John Isenmann and featuring one large structure and two smaller ones. (301 Springfield Avenue today is the site of

the tennis courts.) With him lived his wife, sons John Jr., Michael G., and William F, and two daughters. He continued operating his butcher stalls in the Washington Market and began offering free delivery service throughout Cranford. He advertised in virtually every issue of the *Cranford Citizen* newspaper, offering “City Dressed Beef (No Embalmed Meat)”. Orders could be placed at his home or at stall 192 in the Washington Markets, with delivery made after 8 AM the following day. (It is assumed the meats were delivered to Cranford from the Washington Street Market by train.)

In 1876, Isenmann defeated Alden Bigelow, one of Cranford’s first developers and an entrenched member of the local Republican power structure, for the position of Union County Freeholder. Isenmann ran and won as a Democrat. He began politicking for replacement of Cranford’s wooden bridges. In 1878, the first of six iron bridges was built, not surprisingly, abutting his property on Springfield Avenue.

As noted in Larry Fuhro’s article on the 100th anniversary of the Cranford River Carnivals, these lower steel bridges forced River Carnival entries to put hinges on their floats so that tall features could be lowered before the floats passed under the new bridges.



North Avenue Bridge

John Isenmann was well-regarded in town as an honest and compassionate businessman who allowed those in financial difficulty to continue to use his services without demanding payment. The *Cranford Chronicle* described him as follows in a tribute upon his death in 1905.

“Mr. Isenmann was the embodiment of friendliness and sincerity. The grasp of his hand carried with it unmistakable proof that his heart was warm and cordial.

He was never so happy as when doing some one a service. ‘Certainly-of-course’ was his invariable answer to appeals to his generosity.

Mr. Isenmann’s business reverses were the result of perhaps too rigid an adherence to the Golden Rule. Honest himself, he was unable to discern or suspect dishonesty in others, some of whom repaid his confidence by defrauding him. But a good name is better than riches. John Isenmann left a good name.”

Isenmann seems to have lived a happy and service-oriented existence in Cranford during the late 19th century. He served actively on a number of Freeholder committees, always looking out for Cranford’s interests, and enjoyed membership in the Fireside Council, Royal Arcanum of

Westfield and other social organizations. His adult son Michael would hold a position with the National Park Bank in New York, and son William would hold a position in the Jersey City office of the New Jersey Central Railroad. In 1897 son John Jr. married a local girl, Katherine Braun.

As the new century dawned, however, Isenmann's fortunes took a turn for the worse. In late 1904, his beloved married daughter, Mrs. Anna M. Bull, died young, leaving behind a family. The day after she died, John Eisenmann suffered an "apoplectic stroke" from which he never recovered. He lingered in deteriorating health until October 2, 1905 when he died at home. His son John Jr. would continue to run his butcher business in the Washington Market.

The Eisenmann family continued to suffer reverses. In March, 1908, Eisenmann's other married daughter, Mrs. Everett Damon, died at age 30. In April, 1909 John Eisenmann's widow sold the house and property at 301 Springfield Avenue (one suspects for financial reasons). The property was large enough that the buyer, Nekoboh Realty, planned to build 6 houses on it once the Eisenmann house was removed to a site on Orange Avenue.



John Eisenmann House moved to 111 Orange Ave

In January, 1910, son John Jr. died at his home in Plainfield. That same month Isenmann's sister, Mrs. Margaret Korn, died at her Cranford home on South Avenue.

So that was John Eisenmann, an important advocate for Cranford with the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders; a compassionate and well-loved local business man, and a devoted husband and father. Perhaps we may consider him a bridge between 19th and 21st century Cranford.

Sources:

1. Burditt People Index, <http://cranfordhistory.org/explore-cranford-history/burditt-index-main-page>
2. *Cranford Chronicle*, various
3. *Cranford Citizen*, various
4. Fuhro, Larry, "Down by the Old Mill Stream..." "The Cranford River Carnival at 100", Cranford River Carnival Program, 1986