

Retailing: Goods and Services Emanate from a Tiny Axis to Serve Town

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The first store known in the history of Cranford was conducted by Dr. William Gale of Westfield, who ran a small country store near the John Grant Crane property in 1840. That was about where Springfield now meets West End Place.

Before the trains came, most of the local residents, mostly farmers, did their shopping in Rahway, Westfield or their ancestral hometown of Elizabeth.

When Alden Bigelow and his development compatriots bought the Crane family farm and laid out the town with an eye toward attracting commuter residents, goods and services were needed. Those who sold and served gravitated to the area along the railroad.



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The Cranford Hotel emerged at South and Walnut in about 1870. J.N. Irving set up the Cranford Meat Market next to a grocery store (and post office) at the foot of Eastman Street in 1872. Robert Rindell established a “coal and building materials” yard at Union and Walnut, opposite the train depot in 1867. Phillip Jahn opened a paint store. Livery services, feed stores and blacksmiths popped up to handle the carriage trade that was arriving.

Though small, the basic patterns of today's downtown began to emerge through Bigelow's parcels. The heart of the retail district emerged on the "big block" which in the 1890's was actually two "blocks." One was the A.L. Miller block at the corner of North and Eastman, separated by an alleyway from the Opera House Block, built in 1892 by Margaret Thompson, wife of advertising magnate J. Walter Thompson.

In its two decades, the Opera Block housed Lusardi's tobacconist and confectioner shop, John Marien's pharmacy (where the first phone exchange operated until it wore out the druggist), Potts grocery, Irving's meats, Ferguson's real estate and insurance, Berry's dry goods, Silberg's New York haberdashery and N.A. Barnett's bicycles and sporting goods.

Upstairs were the library, Ferguson & Van Name's executive offices, rooms of the Cranford Mutual Building and Loan Association, the first financial institution that arrived in 1887 (it would later move across the street as Cranford Capital). On the third floor was the Opera House itself. Behind the building was the Cranford Athletic Club.

Miller's "block" contained English & Knox plumbing, T.B. Faitoute's flour and feed, Bryant's barber shop and Miller's fruit and vegetables which had moved from Miller's original building across the street on Eastman. Jahn's paint store and Doremus' grocery were across the street on Eastman, close to Potter's Chronicle building.

Food markets proliferated from the start. There were many of them throughout the town's first century, including King's on North Avenue, Acme in what is now Fern's and later at what is now the Community Center, and A&P where Somerset Farms, Patrician Floors and Casey's are now. There were ten grocery stores as recently as 30 years ago.

The Smith Building, now housing Robinson's was farther up North Union, and Lehman's Grocer's occupied the first floor of the Masonic Building where Mr. Perl's is now.

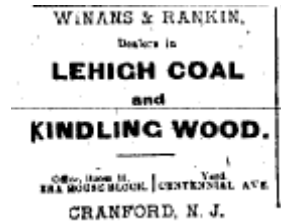
Banks became important "anchors" over the years. The predecessor of Fidelity Union started out in the Masonic Building, to which its president Thomas Sperry, had been a major contributor. Then it moved to the building that replaced the Opera House which burned in 1912. United Counties Trust now stands on the Central Hotel site; City federal is on a portion of the land where the first Hess-Cranford Hotel stood. Queen City predecessors moved to many locations including Sperry's Building (now Pisces Capricorn) before settling in today's triangular home which once housed Robbins and Allison and Reel-Strong.

The downtown was laid out in the horse and buggy era, which later proved inhibitive. "it was not laid out with the automobile in mind," said the first town wide master plan. That's one reason parking and traffic circulation have preoccupied businessmen and the government so often.

None of that was evident at the turn of the century, however, because the town center was small and the community was oriented to horses and bicycles. Aside from the Miller and Opera blocs, the Eastman stores, a few shops on the south side of North Union, and the hotels and Rindell's coal yard along South Avenue, there was no other business in the center to speak of then.

Jonathan Dayton Winans had a blacksmith shop at Centennial and Lincoln which heralded the neighborhood shopping center that still thrives there. Today it includes Rankin Fuel, which dates to 1890 as a collaborative coal sales firm between Winans and the current proprietor's grandfather,

J.C.W. Rankin. Another small but successful neighborhood shopping center grew on Raritan Road much later.



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The major retail thrust developed out of an axis at North and North Union Avenue, the only east-west state artery for years, carried twice the traffic of South Avenue. This benefitted Cranford by bringing in a share of regional trade until after World War II when land-rich towns like Clark built larger shopping centers geared to the automobile. By that time Cranford's downtown evolved into largely serving the town itself.

From the lower Eastman-North and North Union axis buildings expanded lot by lot, not in large parcel developments. The only exception is Cleveland Plaza in 1982, the major new retail-office structure in 70 years. The Post Office Building at Alden and North Union was built in 1918. Bell's building came in 1900, Breen's in 1910 and the Shapiro building in 1922. The downtown spread toward Springfield with the first movie house in 1907, where the Sportsman Shop stands, continuing with Alban and Lewis's building in 1921 and Brown's in 1959.

The northerly portion of Eastman, opposite the triangle, did not take form until after World War II. After it developed, the inside of the largest retailing block, which contained industry and other uses, became the focal plan for changes that after much debate and land negotiations evolved into the Park & Shop lot in 1963.

With the addition of Cleveland Plaza, there are about 100 shops downtown, about ten more than three decades ago. Changes in the economy leading to the growth of service businesses and demands for office space, plus pressure from large nearby shopping malls have affected the town center. The zoning law in 1979 ruled that only retail businesses could operate in first floor store fronts, an attempt to strengthen the retail sector which was described in the master plan that year as "vulnerable to change."

Railroad crossings and safety dominated the dialogue over the downtown in the first quarter of the century, and the Depression curtailed development. It wasn't until the 1950's that the township government and the business community began to look closely at the needs and future of the downtown. The first major effort was a study that came to be known as the Princeton Plan, which contained many recommendations.

The first town wide master plan also included needs of the downtown. The 1979 plan devoted even more attention to the potential problems and like the Princeton Plan came up with suggestions for change including a "Gateway Plaza" at the North-North Union axis, which is still being considered. Parking lots have been improved and the Chamber of Commerce is working with the government on a new metering system and new parking signs. The prospect of a shopping mall in Springfield last angered citizens and businessmen who joined a successful fight to have it defeated.

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