

# “Observations on The Blowing Winds of Cranford’s Time”

*By Ben Chewey*

*Ben Chewey is a graduate of Cranford High School and Fairleigh Dickinson University. He has taken time this past summer to look into some of the obscure areas of Cranford’s history.*

A town is many things. A town a place where people live, it’s where people interact, attend religious services, learn, and buy various products. It’s also where people interact as a community to have fun together. However, the definition of what a popular group activity for a town to experience has changed quite a bit over the last century. One hundred years ago the definition of an entertaining evening out differed greatly from today. Today’s technology has made the difference. In 1911, electricity was still a relatively new concept to most people, and even by that time period many people did not have access to electricity on a daily basis.

Today, we take for granted inventions like television and the Internet. If they had occurred back then, some might have called it witchcraft. There were few options for recreation in one’s home once the sun went down. People wanted to have more options than just going to sleep. Some of those options might seem odd in today’s society. This article will examine how some of the most popular events of the past and the present have differed in Cranford over the years in order to see where society might be heading.

To start off, we will take a look at what was one of the most popular social places in Cranford back in the Gilded Age, the Opera House. Cranford’s Opera House was designed by Frank T. Lent and built by J. Walter Thompson on the north side of North Avenue in 1892. It was a place to hear Gilbert and Sullivan light opera, travelling theater groups, and local performers. The Opera House provided a place where people could gather to chat and catch up with each other’s lives. It was one of the things that helped Cranford establish itself as a legitimate town. It was one of the most popular places in the town, until a fire burned it down in 1912. Between the cost of rebuilding and the changing times, the Opera House was not rebuilt. The Opera House was replaced by the far less glamorous, if still vital, Cranford Trust Company Block.



*The Cranford Casino*

There was more to early Cranford's entertainment options than the Opera House though. One of those things was the casino. The first casino was also designed by Frank T. Lent, who seemed to have had a hand in much of the town's early architecture. This casino was built on Riverside Drive in 1892, and had all the usual gambling games of the time. While this facility did not have much to stand out from other casinos, it was another good place for the locals to gather, catch up on things, and possibly make money. Cranford's casino seemed to be a magnet for excitement. In 1897 the entire building burnt to the ground. However, unlike the Opera house, the casino was rebuilt before the end of the year. The Casino continued to remain a place for people to gather, gamble, dance, socialize, and listen to concerts until 1969, when it was demolished.

These were the biggest social spots of Cranford's past. We now move forward to Cranford's present to see just what has replaced those institutions. Present day Cranford may not have quite such noteworthy places as those mentioned previously, but they still have plenty of ways for people to interact with each other. Sometimes the internet seems to be overcoming physical interaction, but nevertheless real places to meet still exist. Some of those places are from the long standing pastimes in Cranford; a canoe or kayak ride down the Rahway River, or competing in a tennis match on one of the many courts around the town, or a walk in one of the many naturally appealing areas like Nomahegan Park or Sperry Pond. The most popular place is the recently constructed Cranford Community Center. The Community Center is a building where many different groups of various ages can interact and catch up while having fun together. The Cranford Library presents many programs there, including movies, lectures, and music. The Cranford Movie Theater offers a variety of different movies. So, there is no doubt that Cranford still has places where people can interact socially. It's just more diverse and spread out than it was in previous centuries.

However, after comparing the big social gathering places of the past and present, with commercial and residential buildings of today's Cranford, one could notice a far different tone. Unlike in times past, the largest building downtown is a parking garage instead of an opera house. In the previous century, when Cranford was a smaller town, there was more distinction to the places in the town, but as time, technology and society all change and evolve there is more of everything, and also less of everything.

This is not true in every aspect. There are still unique stores in the town after all and it's not even entirely a bad thing, but still it's something that's causing a change that is looking more and more like something that can't be reversed so easily. As less and less options become available, it's almost like people are merely given the choice of what location they want to meet to socialize. Is this narrowing of choices because the people only prefer these few options, or is it merely due to financial reasons for either the town or the business? With such an emphasis on more and more city like structures, will Cranford continue to remain a quiet, yet viable town? In the end, only time will tell, but meanwhile, at least there are plenty of places to keep busy while trying to figure that out.