

Nomination Report



Closter Borough Hall

Closter Historic Preservation Commission

January 2014

Closter Borough Hall
295 Closter Dock Road
Closter, New Jersey 07624
Block 1309 Lot 3

DESCRIPTION: The Closter Borough Hall, erected in 1938, is a two-story, six-bay brick building with exterior ornamentation constructed of cast stone, on the front (south) and east side façades. The architectural style has been noted as Art Deco/Moderne, but might more accurately be described as “PWA Moderne,” a style that combines elements of Art Deco, Streamline Moderne and the Beaux-Arts style. This style appears in the design of many large public buildings between 1933-1944 that were built by the Public Works Administration.

The building has a flat roof. Its cornerstone is in the southeast corner with the completion date of 1938. Later additions to the building include a two-story addition at the rear and a one-story police entrance at the west rear side with garage bays on the north side (rear) of the building. While the building originally housed the fire department and had three garage bay doors and a driveway leading out of the front façade, these doors have been replaced with first floor windows and a single doorway. Decorative elements on the front façade include two stepped panels in a style evocative of ancient Mayan architecture. At the top of these panels are raised circles with radiating “darts” pointing at 2, 4, 8 and 10 o’clock. These panels originally extended above the parapet where there were flagpole mounts. The United States flag and a Borough of Closter flag are present in photographs prior to the alteration that capped the cornice in 1977-1978. Extending around the front and east facades of the building, below the roofline, is a continuous panel of cast stone in an enlarged dentil pattern.

The building’s brick is in a running bond configuration, and there are four sets of raised parallel bands above the first, third, fourth and sixth bays on the front façade of the building and above each of the four bays on the all surrounded with cast stone in the same style as the original doorway ornamentation.

The driveway has been replaced with grass and landscaping. Two garage bays that had been on the east façade of the building have also been removed and replaced with cast stone. One set of wrought iron escape stairs extend from the second story to the ground on the west side of the building, and there is evidence that a similar set of stairs has been removed from the same exterior wall. A tall cell antenna monopole placed in the late 1990’s stands directly behind the Borough Hall.

Original random-laid stone retaining walls with bead joints and jagged rock toppings adorn the southeast, north and west perimeters of the property. The front façade has two stone planting beds and the original concrete sidewalk has been replaced with brick paver walkways

INTERIOR DESCRIPTION: The interior of the building has no notable features except its original interior gray marble steps at the front entrance. The interior has changed over the years to accommodate expanding or exiting departments. Currently the tax offices, police department/jail, the mayor's office and the Borough Administrator's office occupy the first floor, while the municipal council chambers/municipal courtroom, borough clerk's office, municipal court office, land use office, building department, health department, and Tax Assessor's Office occupy the second floor. There are separate men's and ladies' restrooms on both the first and second floors. The basement is used for storage only. There is a mural painted in 2004 by local artist Wilson Reimers, in the entrance hallway of the east entrance to the building, near the elevator.

SETTING: The building is situated on a grassed, landscaped lot on a busy corner at the intersection of Closter Dock Road and Lewis Street. The lot has short random-laid stone retaining walls topped with jagged stones, on the east, west and part of the north side of the lot. There are two raised planting beds, a flagpole, two informational signs and random trees in the front yard. An asphalt parking lot is situated in the rear of the building as well as tall cellular telephone antenna monopole

History: Closter Borough Hall stands on land once owned by O.R. Osborn as shown on the 1876 Walker's Atlas map. During the 1880's this property was used for recreational purposes by the Knickerbocker Baseball Club. The land was purchased for \$3000, but the property owner returned the funds to the municipality because of tax arrears on other property that he owned.

An early newspaper account notes that from 1904, when the borough was incorporated as a separate municipal unit of the State, to 1937, the borough either had too little business or too few funds to warrant the building of a municipal hall. Prior to this time, public records were stored in a variety of locations, including people's homes. A "Bergen Review" article dated March 11, 1938 states: "The Borough Clerk's office was a small room in the private residence of the official, and the borough records were kept both in the attic of his residence or in one of two safes placed in other buildings, some of them inaccessible except at specified periods, which were not always at the time when the records were wanted. The Tax Collector was under the same handicap. A room in his residence was used, much to the discomfort of all borough officials as well as the members of his family."

The Closter Borough Hall was the first municipal building to be constructed in the Borough of Closter. It was constructed in 1938 by laborers from the Works Progress Administration (aka WPA; Public Works Administration). Councilmen George Trautwein and Henry Mandel requisitioned \$10,000 from the borough budget for the building materials, and WPA workers provided the labor at no cost. The town's leaders at that time, including Mayor Howard Wilson and Councilmen

George Trautwein and John Potterton, decided to locate the municipal building “central as designated by the life of the town, not through a civil engineer’s compass” (which would have placed it between First street and Piermont Road).

The Borough Hall was constructed at the end of the Depression era. It was designed by architect Carl G. Mettberg. As recalled by former Closter resident Martha Bogert Semmens: “. . . it was a triumph of the times to have that building built. My father, Edwin Bogert, was a member of the council at that time and even though he was not an FDR man, he was very proud of the building and what it did to consolidate the services of the community. As a child I played on the foundation edges, etc., while Dad regularly checked the building progress. When it came time to consider what should be placed in the Cornerstone, my friends and I provided a copy of the Tenakill 6th Grade publication, THE CHATTERBOX, so we felt a part of this special occasion.”

The cornerstone of the Closter Borough Hall was laid on March 12, 1938. At the opening ceremonies, W.P.A. Administrator Harvey S. Ely and Closter Mayor Howard Wilson addressed the crowd. The invocation was made by Reverend Wilbur De Revere of Closter’s Reformed Church, and the ceremony was closed with a Benediction by Father Dion H. Lickteig, pastor of St. Mary’s Church.

In its early years, the building housed all municipal offices as well as garages for the police, fire department and ambulance corps. The Bergen Review article noted that this building offered protection for fire apparatus that had previously been improperly housed, and for “one of the best volunteer fire companies in the State.” It went on to describe Closter’s police department: “An equally efficient police force had for headquarters nothing short of a “box,” part of a railroad signal tower, freezing in the winter, and suffocating in the summer, lacking even the essential facilities for keeping of any records of the department.”

During World War II, the municipal chambers were transformed into ration headquarters for the borough. Martha Jane Bogert Semmens wrote: “ When the threat of war was upon us . . . Dad was asked to head up the Ration Board for the Northern Valley area. A small office just inside the front door was utilized for supplying ration stamps for sugar. With no staff, our family was drafted and the four of us, Dad, Mom, my sister Sally Bogert Mandle and I were put to work. As more items were rationed, the Council Chambers were soon turned over to the Ration Board. A secretary was hired full time. The Board members consisted of a representative from each community and were all volunteers. They met to approve applications after having put in a full day of work in the city or locally.”

Another wartime adaptation of the Borough Hall was the shelter erected on the roof to accommodate the rotating shifts of civilian air patrol volunteers who scanned the skies for enemy planes. Ms. Semmens remembers: “I’m not sure just what date the Ground Observer Corps was established, but the roof of the building was soon put to

use . . . Women were advised to wear slacks (not the popular attire they are today) as they were required to climb a ladder to get to the little shack shelter above. “

Currently the Closter Borough Hall houses the municipal offices of the Borough Clerk, Land Use Office, Building Department, Tax Collection Department, Tax Assessor’s Office, Board of Health, Police Department and offices of the mayor and Borough Administrator. There is a municipal council chamber room on the second floor that is used for official public meetings as well as municipal court hearings. The basement level provides storage of older public records and a room dedicated to the community food pantry.

DESIGNATION RATIONALE: The Closter Master Plan, Historic Element states: “Protecting Closter’s rich history and extensive inventory of historic buildings helps to retain the community’s special character and authentic sense of place, connecting us with our past. Historic buildings, structures, neighborhoods, and inspired landscapes shape the community’s identity, providing a sense of stability and enduring values.” The Closter Borough Hall building is specifically listed as a potential site for designation in both the Historic Element and in the 2008 Master Plan Re-examination Report.

The Borough Hall is listed as a key contributing building in the Closter Historic District. It is associated with the Borough’s evolution to an independent municipality apart from Harrington Township. Borough Hall was the first municipal building built after Closter was incorporated in 1904, and it provided much-needed office space for the tax office and municipal offices, as well as for the police and fire departments. Many prominent local politicians and clergy played a role in its construction. Closter’s Borough Hall is also emblematic of a national historic trend, in that it was built under the auspices of the Public Works Administration. Its role during World War II further accentuates its historic importance in both local and national history. Its unique combination of Art Deco, Streamline Moderne and Beaux Arts styles makes it architecturally significant, as well.

Thus, the Closter Borough Hall meets local designation criteria as established in Closter Borough Code Chapter 35, Sections 54 (A) subsections 1,2,4 and 5.

Section 54(A)(1) recognizes the significance of buildings “associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the Borough of Closter by reflecting or exemplifying the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community.” As delineated above, the Borough Hall is representative of Closter’s move out of Harrington Township and its incorporation as an independent Borough.

Section 54(A)(2) recognizes the significance of buildings that are “associated with historic personages important in national, state, or local history.” As noted in the

history, the Closter Borough Hall's cornerstone ceremony included such known Closter political and business figures as Henry Mandel, John Potterton, George Trautwein, and Howard Wilson, as well as religious leaders Reverend Wilbur De Revere of Closter's Reformed Church, and Father Dion H. Lickteig of St. Mary's Church.

Section 54(A)(4) recognizes the importance of buildings "that embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; that represent the work of a master; that possess high artistic values; or that represent a significant distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction." The Borough Hall's unique architectural style, as described above, qualifies it for this category.

Finally, Section 54(A)(5) recognizes buildings that "are otherwise of particular historic significance to the Borough of Closter by reflecting or exemplifying the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state, or community." The construction of the Borough Hall by Public Works Administration labor ties Closter's first municipal building to this national historic period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1982 Bergen County Sites Survey

2004 McCabe & Associates Survey – “Closter Historic District”

Bergen Review, March 11, 1938

Closter: Its Economic and Political Life, J. Arthur Pelletier, Inc., Publisher, 1938.

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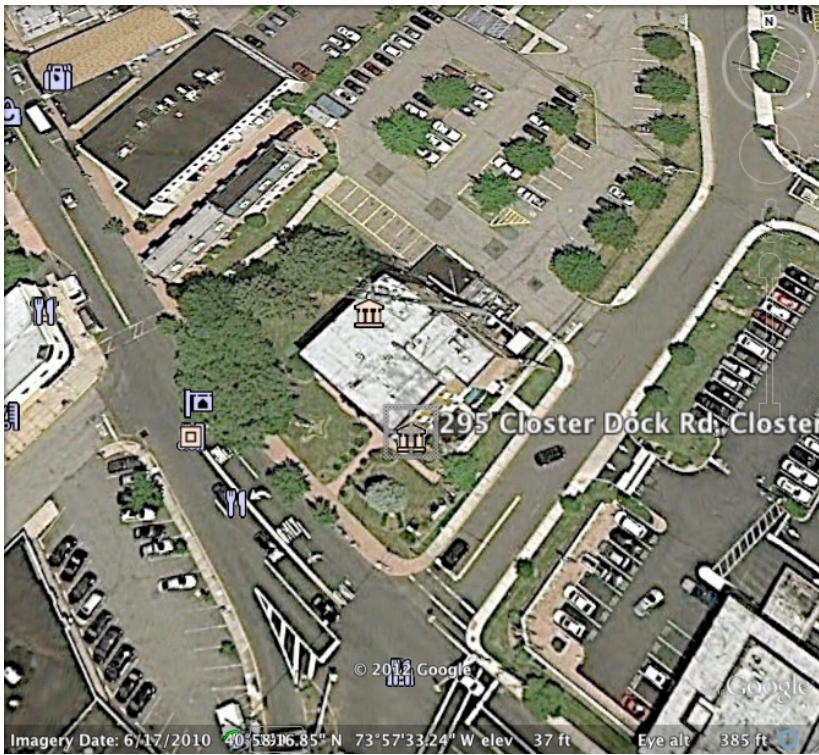
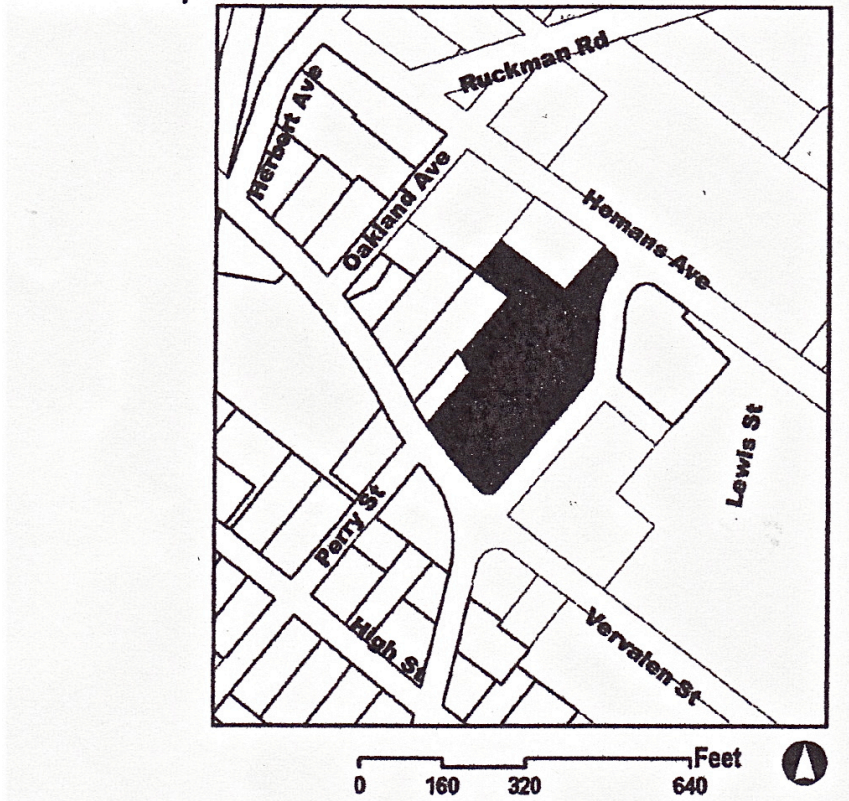
Closter’s 50th Anniversary booklet

Morillo, Patricia Images of America: Alpine and Closter

Letter from Martha Jane Bogert Semmens to the Closter Historical Society dated June 15, 2008.

APPENDICES: Maps and Photos

Location Map:





Front (South) side of Closter Borough Hall, showing cell phone monopole, recent landscaping additions, informational sign and decorative street



Detail of cast stone ornamentation at front door – circle and dart motif at top of pyramidal stepped panels; exaggerated denti row; triple bands of brick, and window panels



Rear (North) and West sides of building



Rear of building showing garage addition and base of cell tower monopole



Rubble stone wall at west side of property



Rubble stone wall at rear of building



Mural painted by local artist Wilson Reimers, entryway on east side of building



Photo taken in 2008, prior to landscaping changes and removal of brick wall with "Closter Borough Hall" signage that had been dedicated to Hertha Worth

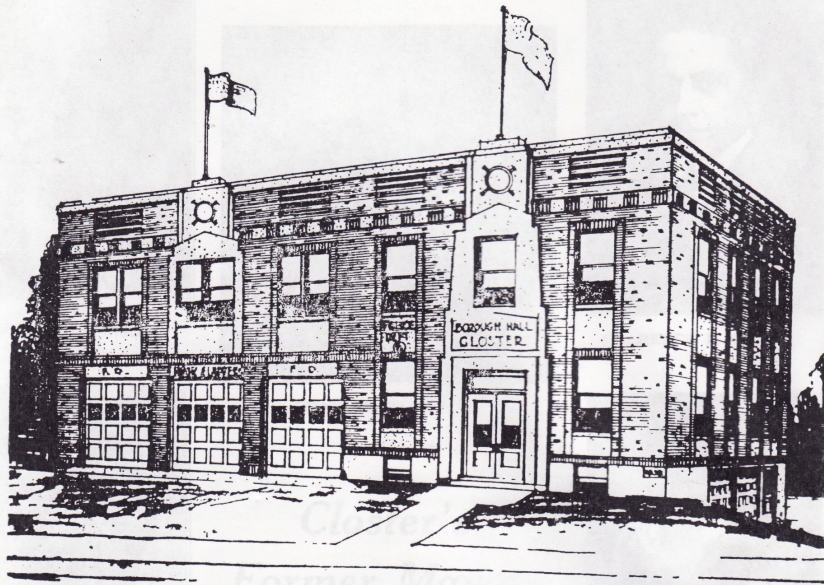


Historic Photo of Closter Borough Hall showing garage doors and projecting flagpoles atop cast stone ornamentation, c. 1940



Interior of Borough Hall used as Ration Headquarters during World War II

CLOSTER'S FIRST CIVIC CENTER



It was in 1936, the last year of Mayor William A. Oliver's administration, that definite steps were taken towards the realization of the cherished desire of all who ever held public office in Closter to have a modern building with adequate facilities for the housing of its departments.

With one exception (John Potterton) the Council is the same as the 1936 body. Every councilman supported Mayor Oliver in his efforts, and all but the details of construction were agreed upon, assuring smooth sailing for the succeeding administration of Mayor Wilson.

The cost of the building, according to the estimates, is to be \$46,000, of which Closter contributes \$15,000 for the land and materials. The Works Progress Administration contributes the cost of labor, and part of the material. The work began in October, 1937, and the building was expected to be completed for occupancy by July 1. However, unforeseen delays have pushed the completion to a later date. Carl Mettberg of Palisades Park is the architect.

Municipal Flag

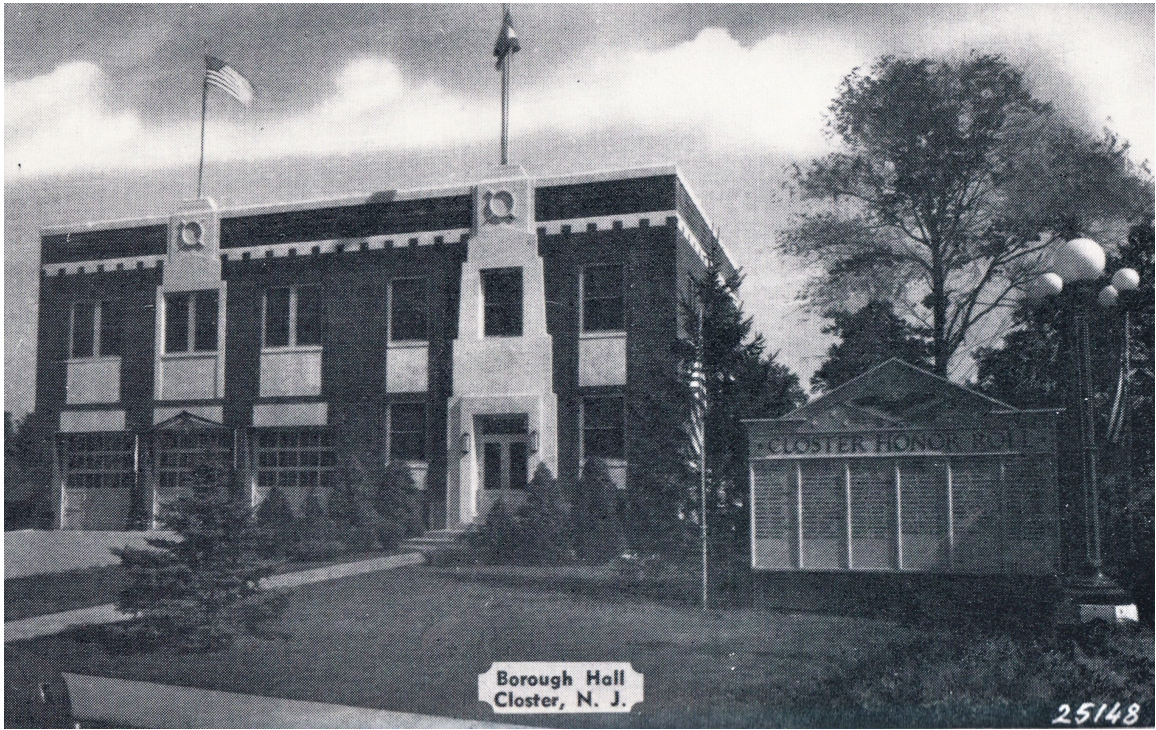
The appearance of two flag staffs on the plans of the Municipal Building gave an inspiration to J. Arthur Pelletier, publisher of the Bergen Review. "Why not a municipal flag for Closter?"

The Council approved plans for a contest sponsored by the Bergen Review. Russell H. Gurnee, age 16, won the contest, in which a committee of the present and former mayors were the judges. The winner, a native of Closter and a sophomore in the local high school, designed a banner of green and white bars bearing the state emblem. He won a prize of \$10 and the honor of presenting the flag to the Council in the name of the Bergen Review at the Municipal Building dedication exercises.



At a subsequent meeting of the governing body, the Knickerbocker H&L Fire Company offered to donate the first American flag to be floated over the new building. Its offer was accepted.

From "Closter: Its Economic and Political Life," 1938. This drawing, which also appeared in the newspaper account detailing the laying of the cornerstone, shows both sets of garages and both flags flying, as well as detail of the Closter, New Jersey flag.



Early photo showing both flags flying and the Closter Honor Roll sign that listed the names of Closter residents in the World Wars



Ladies Auxiliary of the Closter Fire Department, pictured in front of the Borough Hall garage doors, circa 1955.