

Where Was Closter?



Where Was Closter?

By Tim Adriance

February 2026

Introduction

When one considers Closter in this present day, one thinks of the 3.3-square-mile borough that bears that name. This is too narrow a view of what was, in the 1700s and 1800s, an approximately 28-square-mile area. Therefore, the history of Closter extends beyond its current borders. Not taking this into account has led to misunderstandings about the “Closter Horseman,” who he was, and where his ride began.

The municipality of Closter was officially established on April 9, 1903, when New Jersey Governor Franklin Murphy signed Senate Bill Number 105 incorporating the Borough of Closter.¹ But it should be noted that the history of Closter is much older and what was once considered Closter was much larger and undefined. This work endeavors to explore a number of major points regarding the question: Where was Closter? These points include:

1. The earliest settlement
2. Closter was once in New York
3. The name Closter
4. How empty was the Northern Valley?
5. The two Closters and the larger “Closter area”
6. Beginnings of the other towns that were once part of the “Closter area”
7. The real Closter horseman, and how the modern story came to be

The earliest settlement

On April 25, 1710, Lancaster Symes, an English land speculator, sold an “L”-shaped tract of 1,030 acres to brothers Barent and Resolvert Nagel of Harlem for “two hundred twenty-five pounds current money of the Province of New York.”² The brothers would quickly establish the first permanent settlement in the Northern Valley of Bergen County, with homes on today’s Harvard Street and on Hickory Lane.

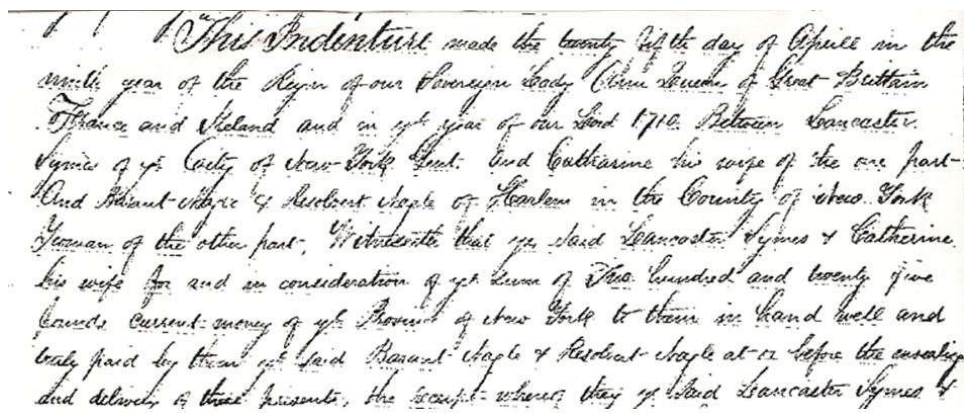
Up until this time, there were no other permanent settlements in the Northern Valley. The area was so unexplored and vacant that earliest documents speak of today’s Tenakill Brook as the “River called Overpecks Creek.”³ It was known that the

¹ *Camden Post-Telegram*, Camden, New Jersey, April 10, 1903, page 5.

² April 25, 1710, Deed between Lancaster Symes and Barent and Resolvert Nagel, Early Orange County Deeds, Orange County Court House, Goshen, New York, Book C, Page 68 & c.

³ Budke, George H., *Abstracts of early deeds, patents, mortgages and other instruments affecting the land titles of Rockland County, NY.*, Library Association of Rockland County, New City, New York, 1975, pp. 165-167.

Overpeck Creek emptied into the Hackensack River at the south. But when early explorers encountered the Tenakill from the north, they mistakenly thought it was the Overpeck Creek as no one had traced its headwaters.



A Portion of the April 25, 1710, deed from the Orange County Archives

Closter was once in New York

Most people do not realize that today's Closter wasn't part of New Jersey until 1769. When Barent and Resolvert Nagel purchased their property from Lancaster Symes, the boundaries to this land were very difficult to determine with any degree of accuracy. And to confound the issue, no one actually knew where the state line between New Jersey and New York was really located.

The boundary between New Jersey and New York began at the joining of the two branches of the Delaware River, just south of today's Port Jervis, New York, and ran at a compass heading to the 41st degree of latitude on the west bank of the Hudson River. However, the iron ore in the Ramapo mountains caused the surveyors' compasses to constantly change heading. And so, there were seven different locations for the state border, as no two surveyors could get the same measurements.

And so, the various incarnations of the state line ranged from as far south as Closter Dock Road to as far north as Piermont, New York (a 6½-mile variation at the Hudson River). Of note, none of these seven borders correspond with today's state border. It was not until 1769 that the current border was finally settled.⁴ An interesting fact is that Closter Dock Road was once the southernmost state line, and the road (east of Piermont Road) was created by New York in 1761.



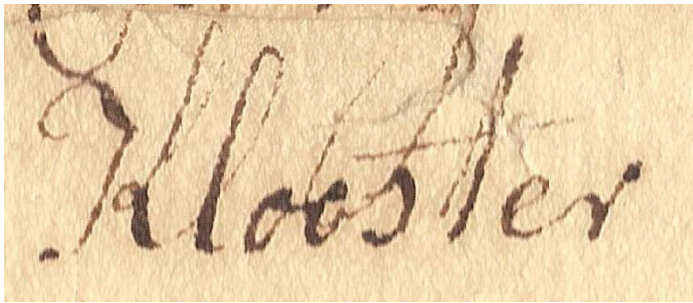
⁴ For a complete study on the establishment of the state boundary line see Budke, George H., *Papers relating to the N.Y. and N.J. boundary controversy, 1686-1775*, Library Association of Rockland County, New City, New York, 1975.

Since the bulk of the Nagel brothers' land is today mostly in Bergen County, New Jersey, one would expect the deed record to be in New Jersey. But there is confusion in locating the deed for the land that became Closter. The original deed for this land is today located in the Orange County Clerk's Office in Goshen, New York – some 35 miles and two counties away, in a different state.⁵

As stated, today's Closter didn't officially become part of New Jersey until 1769. And the deed was originally in the courthouse in Tappan, New York, which was the original county seat of what was the original Orange County. Then on February 23, 1798, the western portion of Orange County split off to become today's Orange County, and the remainder became Rockland County.⁶ Not only did this upstart county take the name, but it also took all the early records. That is the reason the original record for Closter is so far away.

The name Closter

The area settled by the Nagel brothers has been known as Closter since the very early days of settlement. The name is of Dutch origin, and the first record of the name being used for the location dates to a Tappan Patent division deed from November 18, 1721, where in the meets and bounds it says, "Beginning at the bridge which comes out of the Clooster by the Dwars Kill . . ."⁷ Of interest is the use of "the" in conjunction with "Clooster," as if to say it was something specific rather than a general location name. In Dutch the word is "Klooster," which means "a quiet place, a monastery or cloister."⁸



The word "Klooster" from the May 3, 1768, Auryansen deed

This area in 1710, when the Nagel brothers first settled, was a quiet place with very few people in the immediate area. The topography gave a sense of isolation and protection, being tucked behind the highest point of the Palisades and protected by limited access. The Nagel brothers must have felt "cloistered," as if in a monastery, and perhaps it is why they gave the location the name.

Of note, beginning in the very early 18th century, deed records for the area were in English. Thus, many of the Dutch names for locations became Anglicized. Although

⁵ Copies of the deeds can also be found at the Rockland County archives in New City, New York.

⁶ Haley, Jacquetta M., *Rockland County New York in the 1790s*, The Historical Society of Rockland County, New City, New York, 1997 pp. 1-11.

⁷ Early Orange County Deeds, Orange County Clerk's Office, Goshen, New York, Book C, Page 75 & c.

⁸ "Klooster," Cassell's English-Dutch, Dutch-English Dictionary, MacMillan Publishing, Inc. New York, 1981.

a May 3, 1768, deed used the old Dutch spelling “Klooster.”⁹ The name was originally pronounced by the Jersey Dutch-speaking¹⁰ population with a “ow” sound, phonetically, “Klowster.” By 1795, with the emerging new American culture, the “K” was replaced with “C,” and the second “o” in Clooster was dropped, and the American English “long o” sound was adopted. That led to today’s pronunciation and spelling of “Closter.”

How empty was the Northern Valley?

The property south of the Nagel tract and north of what is today’s Englewood consisted of three large land grants that were issued by Governor Carteret in the late 1600s. The individuals who acquired the grants were land speculators, some of whom didn’t even live in America. A number of sales and inheritances caused the land to change hands, but settlement largely did not happen until the first third of the 1700s – and even then, settlement was scant. At the beginning of the Revolution, there were only about 60 houses from the state line to today’s Englewood.

A tract below the Nagel land had today’s Closter Dock Road and Demarest Avenue (in Closter) as its northern boundary. The southern line is found today as the east and west section of County Road in Demarest, from the junction at Piermont Road to the junction with Anderson Avenue. This property was purchased by brothers Gideon, Bernardus,



Bernardus Vervelen House
151 West Street, Closter

Johannes, and Reynier Vervelen.¹¹ The brothers were ages 21, 19, 17, and 14, and none of them were married when they bought the land.¹²

The brothers lived in Harlem, New York, and only Bernardus Vervelen would move to the land. But when he built his house in circa 1713 (today at 151 West Street in Closter¹³), he mistakenly built it a half-mile north of his property line. Soon, one or two others would settle on the large tract.

⁹ May 3, 1768, unrecorded deed between John Ariansen & Mary his wife and Resalvert Arieansen and Arie Arieansen, Auryansen Family Document Collection, Care of Tim Adriance, Bergenfield, New Jersey, Document #20.

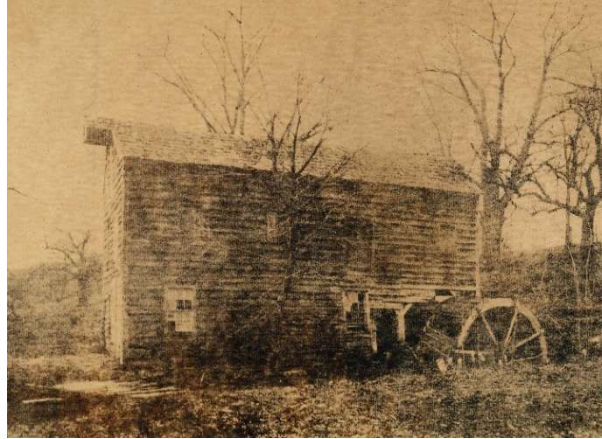
¹⁰ Jersey Dutch was a local dialect based on Low Dutch, or Middle Dutch which was the common spoken language within a 20-mile radius of Hackensack, west of the Hudson River from the 18th century to the middle of the 19th century.

¹¹ The June 8, 1709, deed between Gideon and Bernardus Vervelen to Lancaster Syms mentions the two other brothers, Reynier, and Johannes Vervelen as originally partners in the March 5, 1701, de Hart heirs sale to the Vervelen brothers. Early Orange County Deeds, Orange County Clerk’s Office, Goshen, New York, Book C, Page 247 &c. Of note is the fact that Lancaster Symes and his wife Catherine were parties to the deed as heirs of de Hart.

¹² Riker, James, *Revised History of Harlem*, New Harlem Publishing Company, New York, New York, 1904, p. 681.

¹³ The entire current structure may not be the original building on the site, but the cellar and first-floor beams are those of an early building. On-site investigation of the structure, October 17, 2016, made by Tim Adriance.

South of the Vervalen property was a 2,120-acre tract that had the aforementioned section of County Road as its northern line, and today's Hudson Avenue in Tenaflly as its southern boundary. After 1728, the property was sold and eventually Captain John Huyler, Johannes Westervelt, Samuel Denmarest, Barent Cole, and Peter Bogert purchased portions and settled there.¹⁴



The second mill of Samuel Demarest. The first mill was destroyed during the May 9, 1779, raid on Closter, because he supplied Washington's army with flour. This mill stood just south of 60 County Road, Demarest.

North of today's Englewood was a 2,120-acre tract with today's Hudson Avenue, in Tenaflly, as its northern line. The tract extended south just past the center of the present-day Tenaflly town center. This was acquired by Jacobus Van Cortlandt, of New York, on April 27, 1688. He held onto the land until 1738, when he sold it to his three daughters and their husbands.¹⁵ One of the sons-in-law was Peter Jay, the father of John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the United States. A couple of sections of the tract were sold to settlers, and one settler was Roelf Westervelt, who built his house on the southern boundary line in 1740. (His house still stands at 81 Westervelt Avenue, Tenaflly.) After the Revolution, John Jay's brother, Sir James Jay, moved to a section of the family property that was in today's downtown Tenaflly.¹⁶ The name Tenaflly literally means "at a meadow."¹⁷

The historical record shows that the area west of the Palisades, today's Northern Valley, was very large – and very unpopulated. Other than a section along Tenaflly Road, in today's Tenaflly/Englewood, the remainder of the area had one name associated with it – and that name was "Closter."

¹⁴ Harvey, Cornelius Burnham, *Genealogical History of Hudson and Bergen Counties*, The New Jersey Genealogical Publishing Company, New York, New York, 1900, page 27.

¹⁵ Ibid.

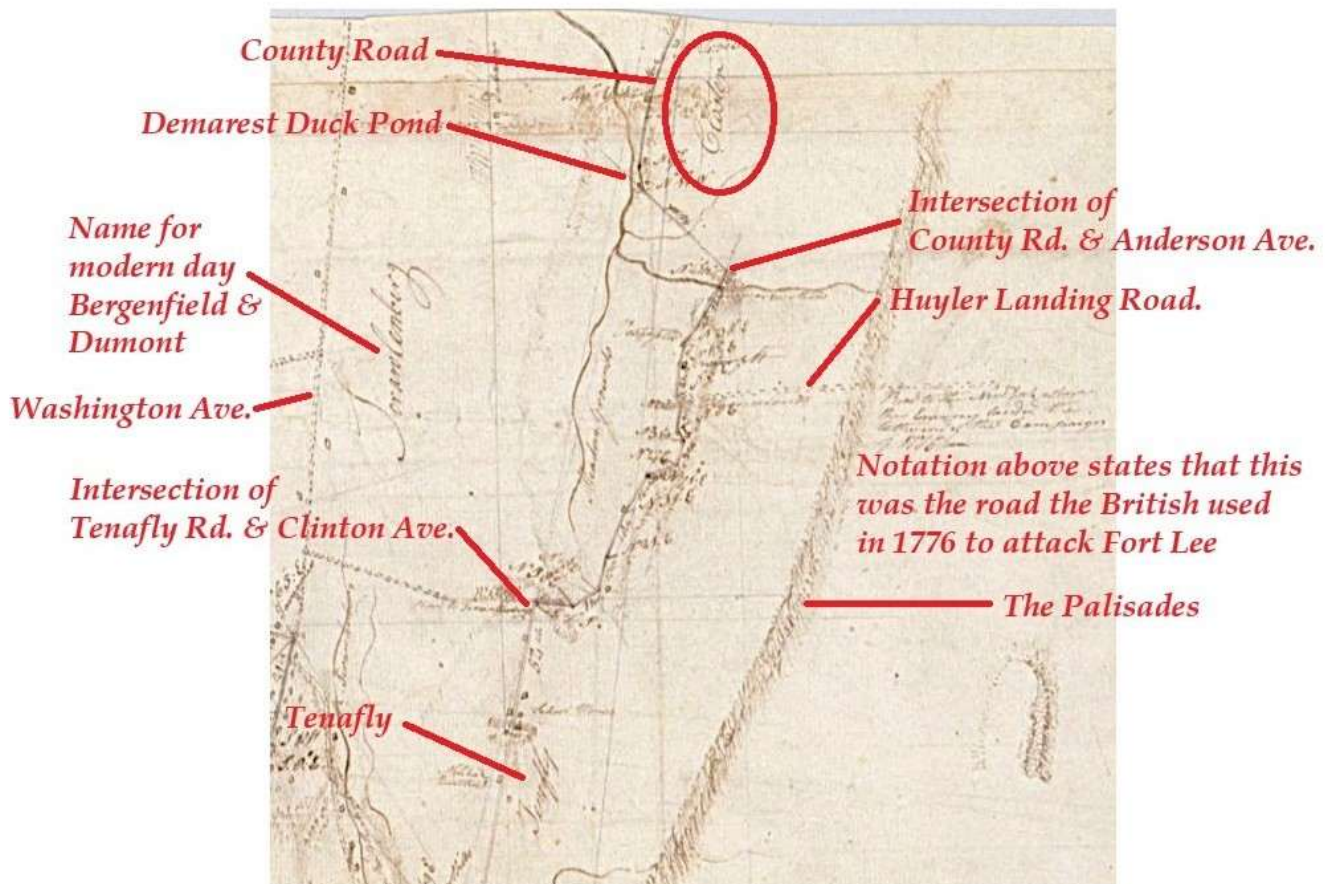
¹⁶ Tenaflly History, Website of the Borough of Tenaflly. Retrieved from: <<https://www.tenafllynj.gov/294/Tenaflly-History>>.

¹⁷ Adriance, Tim, "What Does the Name of Your Town Mean?" *Autumn Years* magazine, Spring 2019, page 48.

The 1778 map section (below) by Robert Erskine and his team (the map makers for the Continental Army) shows the area south of Closter Dock Road to just north of today's downtown Englewood. Known by the short title as Map Number 26,¹⁸ one sees only three location names in this section. There is Tenaflly at the lower left, Schraalenburgh on the left (which is west of the Northern Valley), and Closter shown in modern-day Demarest. The remainder of the area, especially along the cliffs, had no name attached.

Of important note: This map unequivocally shows that Huyler's Landing Road, in today's Alpine and Cresskill, was the road used by Cornwallis and his 5,000 British troops to attack Fort Lee. That road also had the name "Road to Lower Closter Landing." All of the area along the Hudson River shoreline, the Palisades, and the Northern Valley (excluding the Tenaflly meadow) had the name Closter associated with it. The area to the south (from the center of today's Englewood and southward) was called "English Neighborhood."

1778 Erskine No. 26



¹⁸ Map No. 26 full title: *R. from 15 M. stone, near Suffran's to Ft Lee, Hackensack, Closter, Tappan, Clarkstown, Haverstraw +c. No 26 / by J. Watkins Esqr; surveys made by Capt. John W. Watkins A.B.; by Robert Erskine F.R.S. Geogr. A. U.S. and Assistants, Shelby White & Leon Levey Digital Library, New-York Historical Society, New York, New York. Retrieved from: <<https://digitalcollections.nyhistory.org/items/211-robert-erskine-simeon-dewitt-maps-1778-1783>>.*

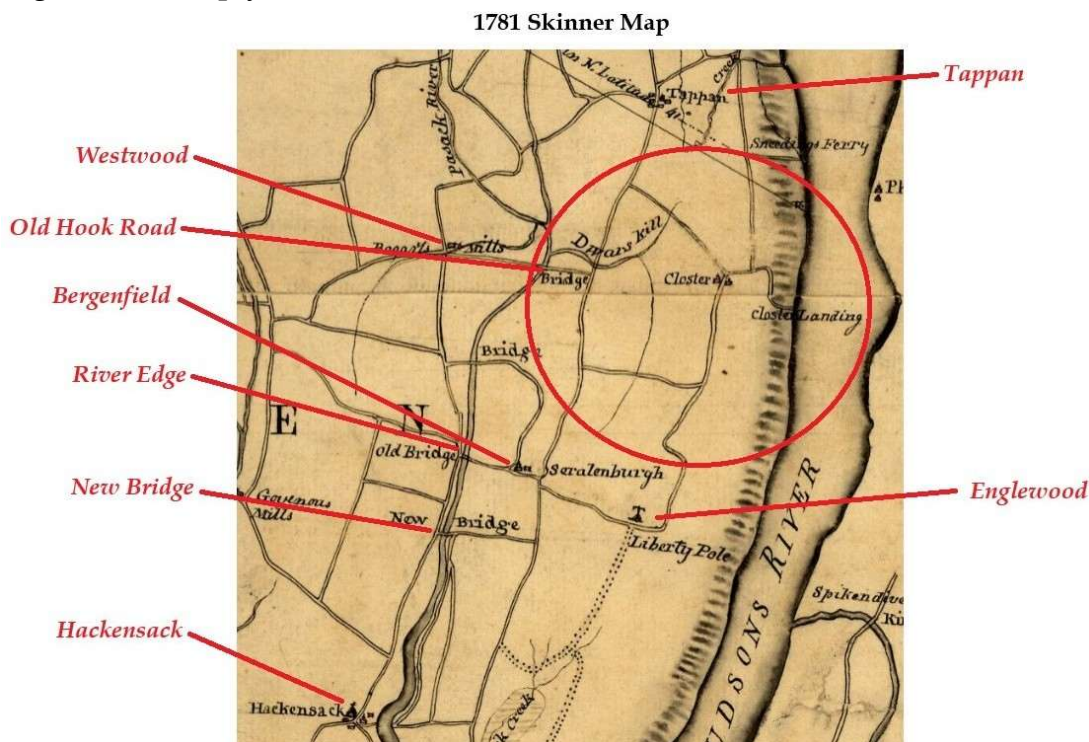
The two Closters and the larger “Closter area”

In the 1700s, the area in and around Piermont Road in today’s Closter was largely the center of population, and the outer areas were simply part of the greater undefined “Closter area.” When the Huyler family created their road up and over the Palisades to their dock, the name given was “Lower Closter.” That name was known, even as late as 1914, when *The New York Times* published an article about the area along the Hudson River and the Palisades.¹⁹ It is important to note that Lower Closter was 1.5 miles south of today’s Alpine Boat Basin, and 3.75 miles from present-day downtown Closter. One can begin to see the scope of the “Closter area.”

Next below Alpine the landmark tower comes upon the old landing formerly known as “Lower Closter.” Today this is called Huyler’s Landing, and its broad

The New York Times, July 26, 1914

Although there was a Lower Closter landing, the location was secondary to the main landing (in some cases, the lower landing did not appear on maps). The 1781 Skinner Map²⁰ simply shows Closter, and the original Closter Landing, with nothing north to the state line and nothing south to Liberty Pole in today’s Englewood. The large region was simply Closter.



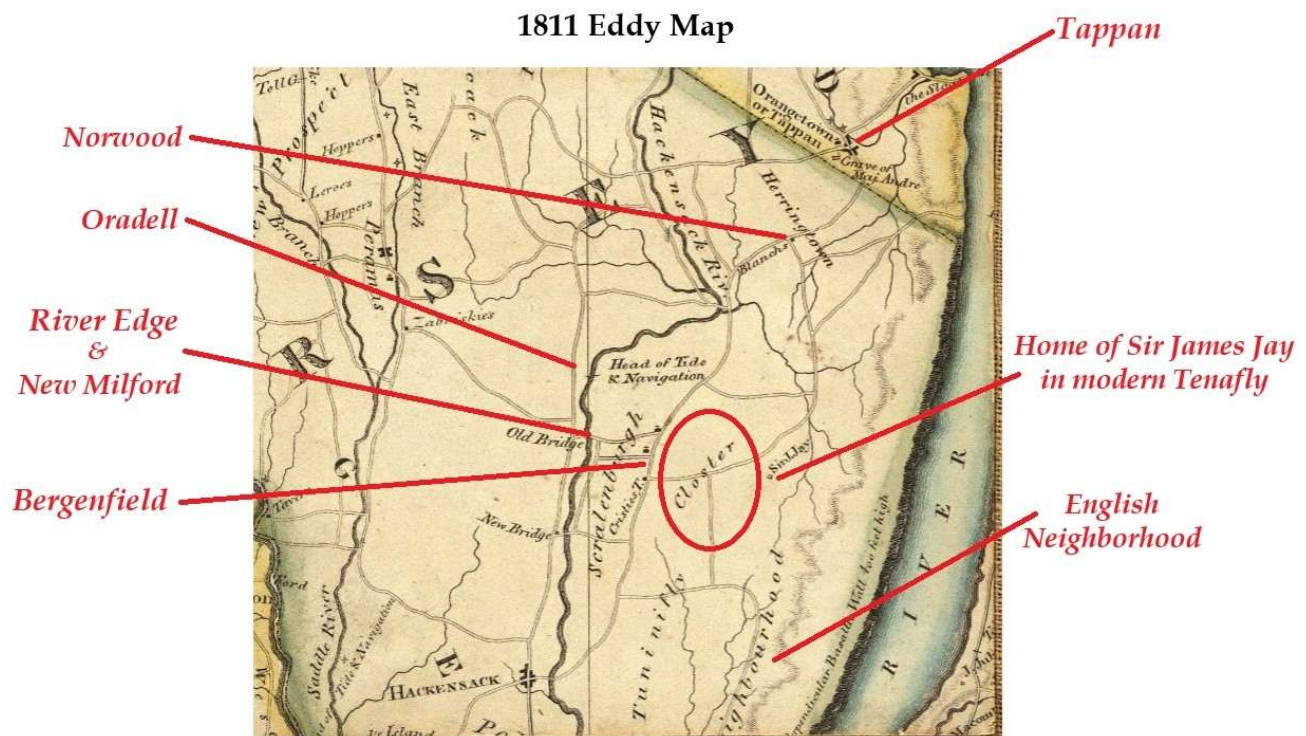
¹⁹ *The New York Times*, New York, New York, July 26, 1914, page 3.

²⁰ Skinner, Andrew; Millidge, Thomas; and Oliver, De Lancey. *A map containing part of the Provinces of New York and New Jersey*. 1781. Retrieved from: <<https://collections.leventhalmap.org/search/commonwealth:q524nj38b>>.

One can now begin to see clearly that the entire area of the Northern Valley, and the expanse along the Palisades, was considered Closter. The section of the 1811 Eddy map²¹ (below) displays the name “Closter” well south of the modern town. In reality, the name is shown on the map in present-day Tenaflly, and this placement was not an error on the part of the cartographer. Evidence will be presented to prove that this location was part of the “Closter area.”

There were no small independent towns at that time in Bergen County, just a few minor villages. And a governmental structure, besides the county government, was found in only a few large townships. On this map, the name for Harrington Township is shown (with a unique spelling), and that township went as far west as the Saddle River.

On the map, the Closter settlement (in the present-day borough) was so insignificant that it is not even noted. The villages of Tappan and Hackensack are depicted with buildings along the main roads, and even the settlement near the Paramus Church (in today’s Ridgewood) is shown. Also, important taverns like Blanch’s in present-day Norwood and Christie’s in today’s Bergenfield are shown. A few prominent homeowners, like Sir James Jay, Zabriskie, and Hopper are also noted.



²¹ Eddy, John H., *Map of the Country Thirty Miles Round the City of New York*, Prior & Dunning, New York, 1811. Retrieved from: <<https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~282~30102:Map-Of-The-Country-Thirty-Miles-Rou>>.

1815 Damerum Map

River Edge

Bergenfield

Closter

Tappan

Fort Lee

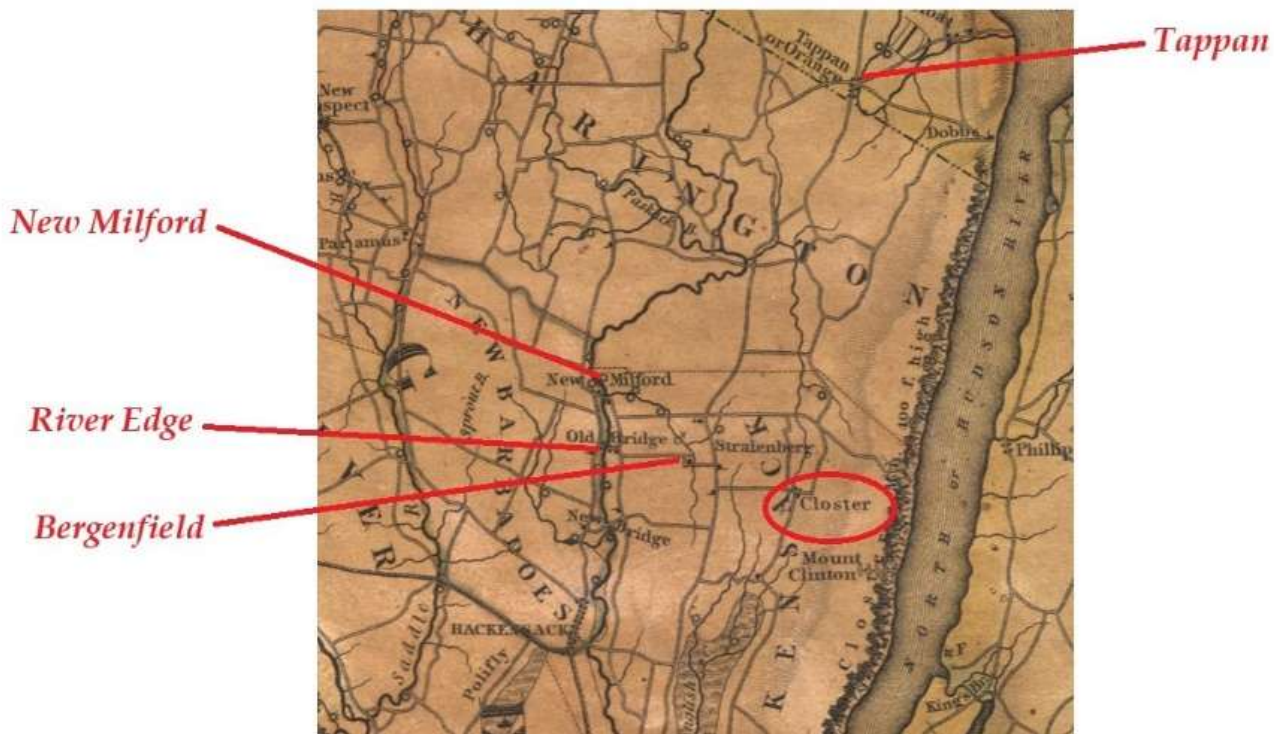
²³ Wardell, Patricia A., *A Dictionary of Place Names in Bergen County, New Jersey and Vicinity*, Dutch Door Genealogy, 2009, page 31.

The section of the 1828 *Map of New Jersey*,²⁴ (below) depicts the name “Closter” in the far southeast corner of the larger “Closter area.” Of note, just below the name “Closter” is the name “Mount Clinton.” This development was proposed in c.1828 as a summer retreat village for wealthy New Yorkers, which never came to be.

It was in the vicinity of the planned “Mount Clinton” that a patriot witnessed the British landing on November 20, 1776. And from here, the real “Closter horseman” began his ride to alert Fort Lee.

This work shows that the location of the officer who warned those in Fort Lee, and who was described by Thomas Paine in his *American Crisis*, was in the area then known as Closter when he saw the British. But he was five miles southeast of the present-day Borough of Closter.

1828 Map of New Jersey

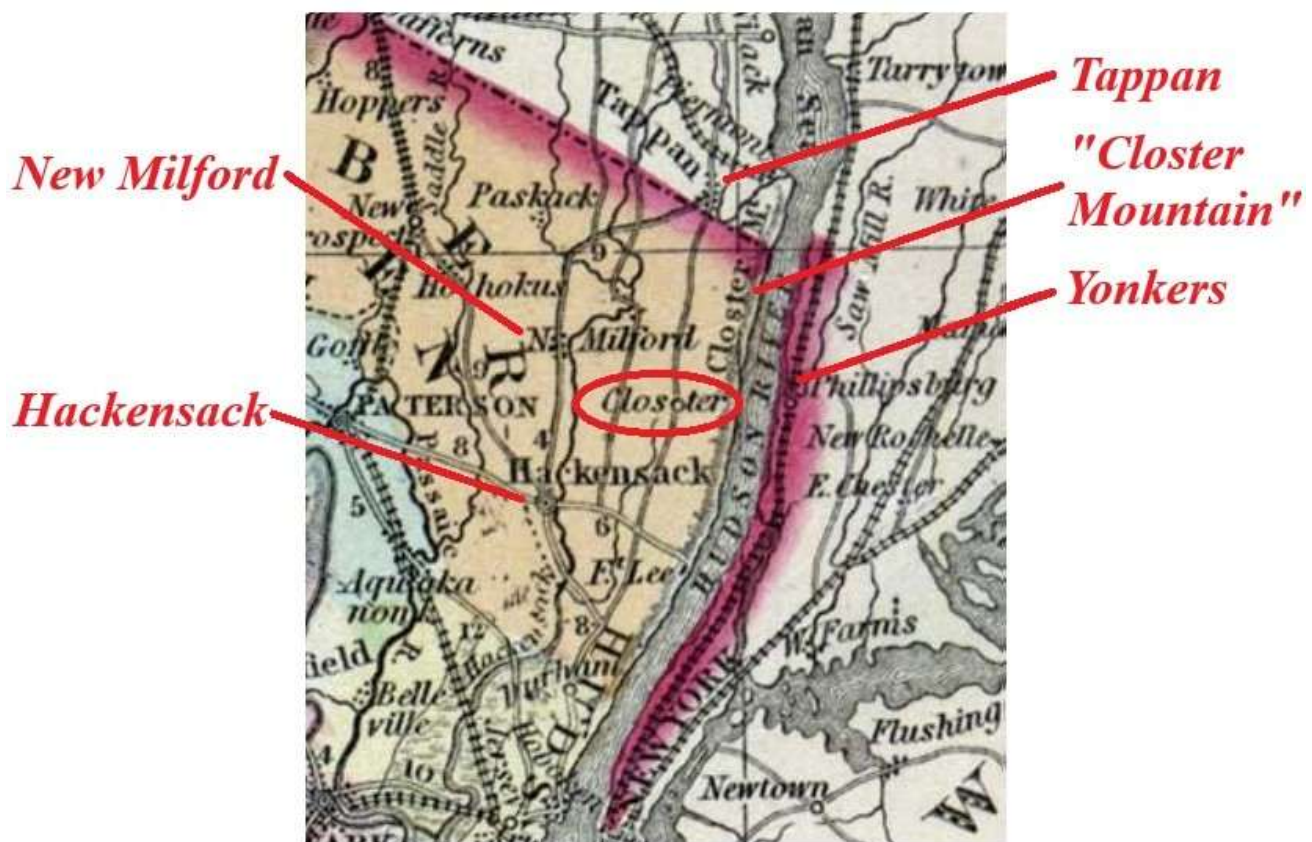


²⁴ Gordon, Thomas Francis, *A Map of the State of New Jersey*, Henry Tanner, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1828. Retrieved from: <<https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~200147~3000094:A-Map-of-the-State-of-New-Jersey-Wi>>.

As late as 1856, when Charles Desilver published his *Map of New Jersey*,²⁵ the entire Northern Valley was still being called “Closter.” Below is a section of that statewide map showing most of Bergen County. Here, the name “Closter” is found southeast of New Milford and southwest of Yonkers, New York. This places “Closter” in the vicinity of modern-day Tenaflly. Evidence will be presented to prove that the people in today’s Tenaflly and Cresskill area considered themselves to be living in Closter.

Another interesting feature shown on this map is “Closter Mountain.” As early as 1796, the Palisades were known as the “Closter Mountains.”²⁶ North of Huyler’s Landing Road, the Palisades rise up in elevation, thus giving the impression of a larger mountain. Many deeds speak of “Closter Mountain” as a single entity.

1856 Map of New Jersey



²⁵ Desilver, Charles, *Map of New Jersey*, published by Charles Desilver, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Rutgers University Special Collections. Retrieved from: https://geography.rutgers.edu/images/NJ_Historical_Maps/NJ_1856.jpg.

²⁶ April 16, 1796, deed between Thomas Lawrence Yeoman and Gerrit Arieysen for 32-acre “parcel of land in Closter Mountains.” Auryansen Family Document Collection, held in care of Tim Adriance, Bergenfield, New Jersey.

The first newspaper mention of the name Closter is found in the *New York Evening Post* on December 9, 1802. Here, John R. Westervelt was selling a 479-acre tract of land "in Closter," from "the main road to the North River," which was one-third mile wide. Interested parties were to inquire at the home of John R. Westervelt, which was "near the premises" for sale.²⁷

The Bergen County tax ratables of 1802 show that Westervelt lived in Hackensack Township²⁸ (the township immediately south of Harrington Township, where today's Closter is located). John R. Westervelt was the son of Roelf Westervelt,²⁹ one of the original purchasers of the 2,120-acre tract north of today's Englewood and south of today's Hudson Avenue in present-day Tenaflly.³⁰ Only a full deed search of every property ever held by John R. Westervelt would prove exactly where that property for sale was located. All evidence indicates that this property was in today's Tenaflly, which was then called "Closter."

A great chance for vesting money in real estate.
VALUABLE lots of LAND for Sale,-----
 On Tuesday the 25th day of January, 1803, will be sold at Public Vendue, on the premises in Closter, Bergen County, State of New-Jersey; a tract of Land extending from the main road to the North-river, being in breadth on said river one third of a mile.—This tract consists of about four hundred and seventy nine acres, one hundred and ninety acres of which are arable and meadow, and two hundred and eighty-six are woodland. It is divided into lots of ten or more acres for the convenience of purchasers, and from its short distance from this city, is at all times accessible in winter. The woodland consists of white oak, chesnut, white ash, Whitewood, Hickory, &c.
 The terms of payment will be made to suit the purchasers, the particulars of which will be made known at the sales. Approved securities for the payment will be required, and an indisputable title will be given. Persons wishing to view the land, will apply to Mr. John R. Westervelt, near the premises, who will shew them, and the bounds of each lot.
 There will also be sold, at the same time, the Water-Lot of these lands, divided into four lots, extending from the margin of the woods to low-water mark.—The shore abounds with excellent stone.
FREDERICK DE PLYSTER,
WILLIAM HAMERSLY.
 Dec 9 to Jan 25

New York Evening Post, December 9, 1802

²⁷ *New York Evening Post*, New York, New York, December 9, 1802, page 3.

²⁸ *County Tax Ratables*, July – August 1802 [New Jersey State Library]; Call Number: FHL Film 411285; Page Number: 8; Family Number: 1.


²⁹ Westervelt, Walter Tallman, Dickinson, Wharton (editor), *Genealogy of the Westervelt Family*, Press of Tobias A. Wright, New York, 1905, page 29.

³⁰ Harvey, Cornelius Burnham, *Genealogical History of Hudson and Bergen Counties*, The New Jersey Genealogical Publishing Company, New York, New York, 1900, page 27.

On February 23, 1820, Peter Jay, the son of Sir James Jay, placed an advertisement in *The New York Evening Post* for the sale of his 600-acre farm, which was stated to be in "Closter."³¹ The property offered for sale (actually in today's Tenaflly) was bequeathed to Peter in his father's will. Sir James Jay, who died October 20, 1815, left a will that was probated in Bergen County on May 3, 1817. In the will, James states that he was living in Hackensack Township³² and the property he was leaving to his son was immediately north of where he was living. (Maps place Sir James Jay's house in modern-day downtown Tenaflly, which was then in Hackensack Township).

The property of Sir James Jay was on the 2,120-acre tract north of today's Englewood and south of today's Hudson Avenue in present-day Tenaflly. That family property was acquired by James Jay's father in 1738 from his father-in-law Jacobus Van Cortlandt (James's grandfather), who received it on April 27, 1688.³³ The advertisement states that the property was just south of a "landing place"; this would be Huyler's Landing (also known as Lower Closter).

FARM FOR SALE.

 The subscriber offers for sale his FARM at Closter, N. J. on the west side of the North River, about 15 miles from New York. The farm is bounded on the east by the North River for one-third of a mile, then runs westward into a beautiful valley, containing nearly 600 acres of excellent land, equally divided into arable, meadow and wood land. The arable and meadows are remarkably well watered by means of a brook that runs through the centre of the farm. The woodland is equal, if not superior, to any in the country: there is a great abundance of timber and fencing stuff. Plaster of Paris for manure answers remarkably well. On that part of the estate which is bounded by the North River, there are several quarries of dock stone, which could be worked to great advantage. A quarter of a mile above the farm there is a landing place, and two vessels constantly ply between that and the city. Game, such as English snipe, woodcock, quail and partridge in great numbers—also, excellent trout fishing. This property will be sold low, and terms made easy and accommodating. A proportion of the payment will be received in productive property in this city. For further particulars, inquire of JOHN O'KILL, No. 46 Wall street, or of the subscriber, 200 Duane street.

Fe 23 th PETER JAY.

The New York Evening Post, February 23, 1820

³¹ *The New York Evening Post*, New York, New York, February 23, 1820, page 3.

³² *Bergen County Wills, Volume B, 1814-1823*, Bergen County Surrogate, Hackensack, New Jersey, page 131 &c.

³³ Harvey, Cornelius Burnham, *Genealogical History of Hudson and Bergen Counties*, The New Jersey Genealogical Publishing Company, New York, New York, 1900, page 27.

The oldest newspaper mention of Lower Closter, which is also known as Huyler's Landing, dates to June 13, 1827, and concerns the murder of David Ackerman, a deckhand aboard the sloop *Phebe*. The sloop and crew were obtaining a load of stone "a mile above Lower Closter" when the murder took place aboard the vessel.³⁴ The story was picked up by newspapers nationwide.

Then on September 30, 1831, an advertisement was published in *The New York Sun* by the contractor employed to improve the road "from Lower Closter dock to the top of the Palisades." He was looking for 20 young men to be laborers for the project, which was going to be undertaken through the winter.³⁵

On April 14, 1842, Peter Huyler published an advertisement in *The New York Sun* looking for a contractor to continue his road construction project at "the top of Lower Closter Dock Hill." He stated that interested parties could see the full description of the work at his residence located in "Closter."³⁶ The home of Peter Huyler still stands today at 50 County Road, Cresskill – 500 feet north of the town line with Tenafly and 2.5 miles from today's Closter. It is very interesting that Huyler's dock was considered Lower Closter, as it was south of the older Closter dock at the foot of the Palisades. But in Huyler's mind, his house in the valley was in "Closter" – a region and not the town one thinks of today.

NOTICE is hereby given to contractors that a road is to be contracted for, located on the top of Lower Closter Dock Hill, between three and four hundred yards in length, adjoining that part which has already been worked. Those who wish may examine the ground, which is marked out, and call at the residence of Peter Huyler, where a description of said road will be given and proposals received until April 15th, 1842.

He also offers to let the premises and improvements at said dock, such as a new house, store house, stable, &c., from the first of May, and recommends it to be an excellent stand for a country store; a steamboat plying daily. For further particulars inquire of the said Peter Huyler.

Closter, April 11, 1842. A143*

The New York Sun, April 14, 1842

³⁴ *Evening Post*, New York, New York, June 13, 1827, page 2.

³⁵ *The New York Sun*, New York, New York, September 30, 1841.

³⁶ *The New York Sun*, New York, New York, April 14, 1842.

In 1845, the *Panorama of the Hudson River from New York to Albany* was published.³⁷ That series of hand-drawn images gives a view of the Palisades in Bergen County. The section from the panorama (below) has been annotated in order to point out locations of importance. Starting on the left, there are:

- (A) Burdett's Ferry, today known as "The Colony" in Edgewater.
- (B) The location of Fort Lee, today the George Washington Bridge, is immediately north of where the fort's batteries stood.
- (C) The approximate location where the real "Closter horseman" was standing when he saw the British landing to the north in their effort to capture the fort. This area was the most southeastern section of the greater "Closter area."
- (D) Green Brook Water Fall, which is 800 feet north of present-day Tenafly's northern town line.
- (E) Lower Closter, also known as Huyler's Landing. This is where the British boats landed in 1776 and 5,000 troops disembarked, who then scaled the very steep primitive road owned by Huyler.
- (F) Closter Landing, which today is the Alpine Boat Basin.



1845 view of the Palisades in Bergen County from the *Panorama of the Hudson River from New York to Albany*. Much of this image was considered "Closter."

Beginnings of the other towns that were once part of the "Closter area"

In the first half of the 19th century, the Northern Valley was an extremely isolated place, and there were few newcomers. There were scattered farms, but no towns to speak of, and the entire region was "Closter." That began to change in 1854, when the idea for a railroad (Northern Railroad of New Jersey) was conceived. On May 26, 1859, the Northern Railroad of New Jersey opened with much fanfare,³⁸ and the construction

³⁷ Wade, William, *Panorama of the Hudson River from New York to Albany*, publisher William Croome, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1845. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Retrieved from: <<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/d2aa9df0-c5ed-012f-def0-58d385a7bc34>>.

³⁸ *Rockland County Journal*, Nyack, New York, Vol. XVIII, No. 18, May 28, 1859, page 2.


of the railroad spurred development along the line. In February 1860, the *Rockland County Journal* reported that since the opening of the new railroad, “The country was fast settling, and that in a very few years they expected to have Closter City in full operation.”³⁹ That “city” is what we know as today’s downtown Closter, which the borough declares to be the “Historic Hub of the Northern Valley.”

The railroad quickly prompted development all along the line. An 1860 advertisement from the *Rockland County Journal*⁴⁰ (below) notes the trains to and from New York City and the station stops along the way. The trains from New York stopped at Hackensack Junction (present-day Ridgely), Fort Lee (present-day Leonia), Englewood, Lower Closter, and Closter. Clearly, in 1860, there were two distinct “Closers.”

NORTHERN RAILROAD OF N. J.

NEW-YORK, PIERMONT & SUFFERN

Hackensack, Closter, Tappan, Nyack,
Blauveltville, Nanuet, Haverstraw,
Spring Valley, Monsey, &c.



On and after Monday, July 2d, 1860.

Trains will run as follows, Daily, (Sundays excepted):

TO NEW YORK. 6:40 a. m. from Piermont Way Passenger, stopping at all stations. 6:40 a. m. Express Passenger from Suffern stopping at Tallmans, Monsey, Spring Valley, Nanuet and Blauveltville. 7:00 a. m. from Piermont, connecting with the above at Upper Piermont stopping at Tappan, Closter, Englewood, Fort Lee, and Hackensack Junction, and arriving in New York 6:00 a. m. 7:35 a. m. from Piermont, Passenger, stopping at all stations. 3:40 p. m. Milk, Market Freight and Passenger, from Suffern, stopping at all stations. 3:15 p. m. from Piermont, Milk and Market Freight and Passenger, stopping at all stations.

From New York. Leave foot of Cortlandt St., Jersey City Ferry. 5:00 a. m., way freight and passenger train. 4:00 p. m., passenger for Piermont, stopping at all stations. 6:00 p. m. Rockland Express, stopping at Hackensack Junction, Fort Lee, Englewood, Lower Closter, Closter, Tappan, Upper Piermont, Blauveltville, Nanuet, Spring Valley, Monsey and Tallmans. Arriving at Suffern at 5:00 p. m.—connecting with Night Express West on the N. Y. and Erie Railroad. 6:00 p. m. Way Passenger for Suffern, stopping at all Stations and taking Freight for Rockland County.

Rockland County Journal, November 24, 1860.

³⁹ *Rockland County Journal*, Nyack, New York, Vol. XX, No. 5, February 25, 1860, page 1.

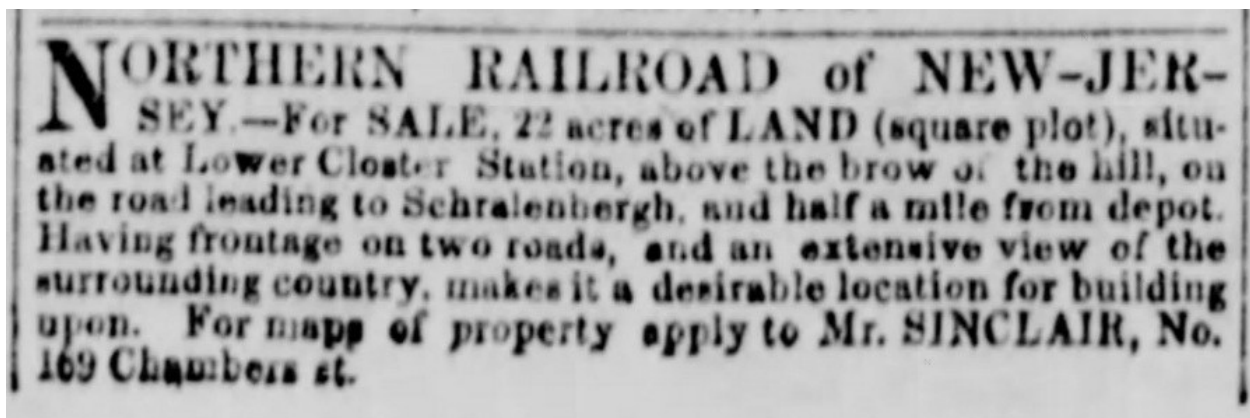
⁴⁰ *Rockland County Journal*, Nyack, New York, Vol. XX, No. 17, November 24, 1860, page 4.

The birth of the various towns in the Northern Valley began soon after the trains started rolling. These new towns – once part of the larger, undefined “Closter area” – became organized communities.

First among them was Englewood. (Historically, only the northern section of present-day Englewood was part of the “Closter area,” and the southern section was part of English Neighborhood.) Shortly after the railroad opened, six men led by Thomas W. Demarest filed a subdivision map with the Bergen County Clerk on August 15, 1859. The group of men hired George P. Hopkins, Civil Engineer, to survey their properties, and he created the map – which laid out Englewood.⁴¹

Unlike Englewood, which was created from empty farmland, Tenaflly had a few settled farms along the colonial roads. The majority of present-day Tenaflly was part of the greater “Closter area.” With the construction of the Northern Railroad of New Jersey, a station to serve that area was planned. A December 3, 1860, timetable listed what we know as the Tenaflly station as “North Englewood.”⁴² On June 13, 1865, the name Tenaflly was officially adopted.⁴³

Cresskill, the next station along the railroad line, was first called Lower Closter Station (the name Lower Closter was associated with the landing along the Hudson River owned by the Huyler family since the time of the Revolution). The Lower Closter name was still in use as late as June 11, 1862, when the advertisement (below) was published in the *New York Tribune*.⁴⁴



New York Tribune, June 11, 1862

⁴¹ *Map of the Property of Thomas W. Demarest & Others, Englewood, Bergen County, New Jersey*, Bergen County Clerk's Office, Hackensack, New Jersey, filed August 15, 1859.

⁴² *Rockland County Journal*, Nyack, New York, April 11, 1903, page 4.

⁴³ Wardell, Patricia A., *A Dictionary of Place Names in Bergen County, New Jersey and Vicinity*, Dutch Door Genealogy, 2009, page 106.

⁴⁴ *New York Tribune*, New York, New York, June 11, 1862, page 6.

Between June 1862 and April 1864, the Lower Closter Station was renamed Cresskill Station. A real estate advertisement in *The New York Times* on April 21, 1864, confirms that the name was changed before that date. Advertised for sale was a 22-acre property described as “half a mile from Crisskill (formerly Lower Closter) station.”⁴⁵

ADRIAN H. MULLER, Auctioneer.

VALUABLE BUILDING PLOTS NEAR CRISSKILL STATION.—ADRIAN H. MULLER, P. R. WILLINS & CO., will sell at auction on **FRIDAY, April 22, at 12 o'clock, at the Exchange Salesroom, No. 111 Broadway :**

22 acres of land in the Township of Hackensack, Bergen County, N. J., half a mile from Crisskill (formerly Lower Closter) Station, on the Northern Railroad, 17 miles from New-York. The land is situated on an elevation, bounded by two roads, and has ample frontage (2,000 feet) for being properly divided. The locality is one of the best on the road, and its accessibility to the City makes it desirable either as an investment or for improvement. The attention of merchants, bank and insurance offices is invited to this sale. The land will be sold in two plots of 11 acres each. Maps at the office of auctioneers.

The New York Times, April 21, 1864

The beginnings of the town of Demarest are first found in an 1865 real estate advertisement for the sale of a 42-acre farm at “Demarest Station, Bergen County.”⁴⁶ By 1871, a post office by the name of Demarest was in existence.⁴⁷ Then in 1874, Demarest was fully established with the construction of its iconic railroad station. By 1876, Demarest had – in addition to the station – a school, a store, a large grand hotel, a Baptist Church, and numerous dwellings.⁴⁸

The town of Norwood was once a section of the greater “Closter area.” On January 13, 1868, the Norwood Post Office was established with Peter Kline as the first Postmaster.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *The New York Times*, New York, New York, April 21, 1864, page 6.

⁴⁶ *New York Herald*, New York, New York, December 14, 1865, page 9.

⁴⁷ Wardell, Patricia A., *A Dictionary of Place Names in Bergen County, New Jersey and Vicinity*, Dutch Door Genealogy, 2009, page 26.

⁴⁸ Walker, A. H., *Atlas of Bergen County, New Jersey*, C. C. Pease, Reading, Pennsylvania, 1876, plate 90.

⁴⁹ Wardell, Patricia A., *A Dictionary of Place Names in Bergen County, New Jersey and Vicinity*, Dutch Door Genealogy, 2009, page 706.

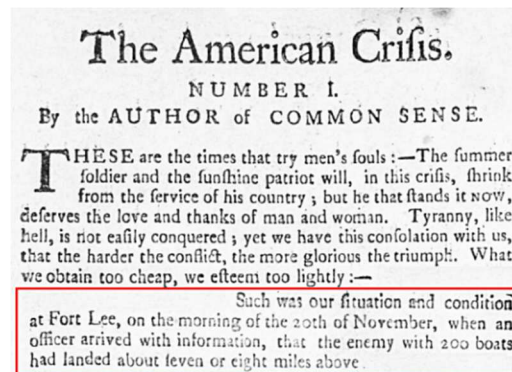
Present-day Northvale was known as Carrieville as early as May 1867.⁵⁰ On December 16, 1871, the *Rockland County Journal* reported that “the people of Carrieville are erecting a large handsome brick depot.”⁵¹ Before April 1877, Carrieville became known as Neuvy.⁵² The Neuvy Post Office was established on April 25, 1882, with Dennis O’Connor as the first Postmaster. Then on November 16, 1887, the name of the Post Office was changed to Northvale.⁵³

So, where was Closter?

From this extensive amount of evidence, it has been proven that Closter was not just the present-day borough. Rather, Closter was an undefined region that, until the mid-1800s, encompassed the Northern Valley from the center of Englewood to the New York State line. So, to answer the question, “Where was Closter?” It was located in the approximately 28-square-mile northeast corner of Bergen County.

The real Closter horseman, and how the modern story came to be

Having established how large Closter was, it is important to investigate the origins of “the Closter horseman” of the American Revolution. The story of this “Paul Revere” in Bergen County is first found in the factual account by Thomas Paine in his pamphlet, *The American Crisis*, published in December 1776. Paine simply states, as a witness to the event: “Such was our situation and condition at Fort Lee, on the morning of the 20th of November, when an officer arrived with information, that the enemy with 200 boats had landed about seven or eight miles above.”⁵⁴ That, for 235 years, was the only published factual information concerning the individual who alerted the fort.



Composite image from the text of *The American Crisis*, with emphasis

⁵⁰ *New York Herald*, New York, New York, May 16, 1867, page 9.

⁵¹ *Rockland County Journal*, Nyack, New York, Vol. XXI, December 16, 1871, page 5.

⁵² *New York Herald*, New York, New York, April 22, 1877, page 19.

⁵³ Wardell, Patricia A., *A Dictionary of Place Names in Bergen County, New Jersey and Vicinity*, Dutch Door Genealogy, 2009, page 65.

⁵⁴ Paine, Thomas. *The American crisis No. 1 By the author of Common sense. Boston Sold opposite the court house Queen Street.* Boston, 1776. Pdf. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/2020774926/>.

After the publication of Paine's account, the story of a rider coming to alert the garrison at Fort Lee was unknown to the people of Bergen County for 171 years. (Unless one happened to read Paine's pamphlet.) Not a single, pre-1947 book on the history of Bergen County provides even a solitary reference to the account. Nor is there a mention of the story in any pre-1947 newspaper. In addition, there is no known oral history of the rider, and there are no diary accounts. The story of a rider alerting the fort was simply a footnote to greater Revolutionary War history and was forgotten as part of Bergen County history.

Even the landing place of the British, and their route to Fort Lee, largely became lost to memory as time passed. The road to Lower Closter Landing, also known as Huyler's Landing Road, and the associated dock largely became unused once the railroad was established. The road was simply too steep and treacherous for common travel. In 1900, the Palisades Interstate Park Commission was created,⁵⁵ and the park was dedicated in 1909.⁵⁶ When the park was created, the section of Huyler's Landing Road from the top of the cliffs to the river was abandoned and forgotten.

In contrast, Closter Dock Road – the other road to the north that went from the valley to the Hudson River at the time of the Revolution – never ceased to be a major thoroughfare to the river. In the 20th century, the Yonkers-Alpine Ferry (from 1920⁵⁷ to when it closed in 1956) carried 12 million vehicles and over 66 million passengers⁵⁸ – the majority of whom traveled on Closter Dock Road.

It was widely known that the British came to capture Fort Lee on November 20, 1776. And as recorded, the British arrived via boat and then trudged up the Palisades. With Lower Closter Landing and Huyler's Landing Road having been lost to popular memory, the route of the British was assumed to be Closter Dock Road. And so, a false narrative of British troops going through present-day Closter was created. With that belief, people's imaginations ran rampant.

One popular tall tale, about a local little girl who traveled to proclaim, "The British are coming," was first published by the *Newark Evening News* in 1923.⁵⁹ In this fable, a young Closter girl named Polly Wyckoff saw the British army passing by her house on November 19, 1776. She first finished eating her porridge, and then – like Paul Revere – alerted the countryside. The facts concerning this myth:

- Not a single record shows a Wyckoff family living in Bergen County during the Revolution.
- The first Polly Wyckoff wasn't born until 1792 (in Somerset County).

⁵⁵ *New York Daily Tribune*, New York, New York, January 20, 1900, page 7.

⁵⁶ Website of The Palisades Interstate Park Commission. Retrieved from: <<https://njpalisades.org/about/>>.

⁵⁷ *The Yonkers Herald*, Yonkers, New York, May 11, 1920, page 11.

⁵⁸ *Daily News*, New York, New York, December 28, 1956, page 32.

⁵⁹ *Newark Evening News*, Newark, New Jersey, December 1, 1923, page 24.

- The British marched through today's Alpine and Cresskill (not Closter) to capture Fort Lee.
- That invasion did not take place on November 19, but rather on November 20, 1776.

This fictional character became the namesake of a local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. And when they took the name in 1927, they claimed that Polly Wyckoff was "a little girl living in Fort Lee."⁶⁰

Factual historical accounts of what actually happened in the attack on Fort Lee on November 20, 1776, are found in primary source documents. Eyewitness details of the event were captured by those present and are recorded in a series of veteran pension applications to the United States government. The applications were written and submitted roughly between 1818 and 1832 by the actual soldiers. These remained buried in the National Archives until discovered after years of research by renowned Revolutionary War author Todd Braisted.

In 2011, Braisted published a work that revealed, from the documents in the National Archives, the true identity of the "Closter horseman." He was Lieutenant John Clifford from Pittstown (Kingwood Township, Hunterdon County), who witnessed the British landing on November 20, 1776. Clifford was in Colonel Philip Johnson's battalion of Brigadier General Nathaniel Herd's Brigade of New Jersey State Troops. It was Lieutenant Clifford who rode to alert Fort Lee.⁶¹

Unfortunately, the fabricated modern tale of "the Closter horseman" was born on April 28, 1947, and it became cemented in the minds of people as truth. On that day in 1947, Arthur J. O'Dea – Bergen County District Court Judge⁶² and then-President of the Bergen County Historical Society – presented the yarn at the "People's Forum" held at the Johnson Public Library in Hackensack. He began his talk, titled *George Washington in Bergen County, 1776*, by saying: "We do not know who that lone countryman was, but I suspect it was a Closter farmer who, going about his chores on that fall morning, realized what the British were doing."⁶³

Obviously, O'Dea, who was not a trained historian, drew from the account in Paine's *American Crisis* about a rider arriving at the fort. And he married that with the then 24-year-old popular, unfounded notion that the British went through present-day Closter. O'Dea also failed to completely grasp the fact that Paine clearly stated it was an officer who alerted the fort, not some yeoman farmer.

⁶⁰ *Bergen Evening Record*, Hackensack, New Jersey, September 12, 1927, page 8.

⁶¹ Braisted, Todd, "The Means of Saving the Army," *In Bergen's Attic*, Bergen County Historical Society, Fall 2011, page 11.

⁶² Obituary of Judge Arthur O'Dea, *The Local Review*, Park Ridge, New Jersey, September 19, 1974, page 14.

⁶³ *The Bergen Evening Record*, Hackensack, New Jersey, April 29, 1947, page 11.

The report of O'Dea's presentation in *The Bergen Evening Record* quoted him as saying of the rider: "He jumped on his plow horse and went to General Greene in Little Ferry, who immediately contacted Washington in Fort Lee."⁶⁴ This statement is completely absurd, as it was positively well known in 1947 that Washington was headquartered in the Mansion House, on The Green, in Hackensack.

It was also known that Major-General Nathanael Greene was at Fort Lee. The reported statement by O'Dea is found to be even more ludicrous, as he had to know that the Mansion House was Washington's headquarters. When that building was torn down two years prior, in 1945, the Bergen County Historical Society – of which O'Dea was president – took great effort to acquire the fireplace mantel from the room where Washington stayed.⁶⁵

In 1957, O'Dea's *Washington and His Army in Bergen County, November 13th-21st, 1776* was published by the Bergen County Bar Association.⁶⁶ In the forward of the booklet, Association President Paul T. Huckin wrote: "The Bergen County Bar Association hopes its efforts will spur further research and that perhaps the identity of 'the Lone Countryman of Closter' can be established."

In his pamphlet, O'Dea does not cite any sources with footnotes but rather gives a bibliography of 14 works that supposedly provided his information. In the bibliography, there were only four maps, a court case, and the translated letters of Hessian General Baurmeister that can be considered primary sources. All the other sources are secondary and are from the early 20th century (except the 1855 reminiscences of the grandson of Peter Bourdette, owner of the ferry below Fort Lee).

In the pamphlet's bibliography, O'Dea notes that he referenced the Erskine maps in the collection of the New York Historical Society. But he obviously missed Erskine Map Number 26, which clearly shows the lower Closter landing road as the path that the British used. Rather, O'Dea regurgitates the false narrative that the Alpine Boat Basin was the landing point and that the present-day Closter Dock Road was used by the British. It appears that O'Dea was either completely unaware of the Lower Closter Landing, or he simply found it easier to recite the popular folklore.

O'Dea shows a photo of the Blackledge-Kearny House in Alpine and calls it the "Cornwallis Lodge," speculating that it was used as the British General's headquarters. That myth, and the fictional claim that Closter Dock Road was the route by the British, was publicly shown to be dubious at least 30 years before O'Dea repeated it. The association of the house with Cornwallis, and the use of Closter Dock Road, has been shown to be a fabrication. That falsehood was created in the 1930s amid "the hoopla of

⁶⁴ *The Bergen Evening Record*, Hackensack, New Jersey, April 29, 1947, page 11.

⁶⁵ One can give O'Dea the benefit of the doubt, as the newspaper reporter may have incorrectly chronicled the facts of the speech.

⁶⁶ O'Dea, Arthur J., *Washington and His Army in Bergen County, November 13th-21st, 1776*, Bergen County Bar Association, Hackensack, New Jersey, Pandick Press, Inc., Newark, New Jersey, 1957.

the dedication ceremony and the opening of the house to the public,” according to Chief Public Historian for the Palisades Interstate Park, Eric Nelson.⁶⁷

Without any factual substantiation, O’Dea’s 1957 published account had cemented the folklore, saying: “Our fate that eventful morning was left in the hands of a lone Bergen County patriot. An unknown country man from Closter, who may have been a plowman out early that fall morning in his fields, first saw the large army of Redcoats marching well down Closter Dock Road. The lone country man from Closter raced as fast as he or his plow horse could travel to Fort Lee with the first alarm to General Greene, ‘The British are coming!’”

O’Dea’s myth about a man from Closter is completely false. The truth about “the Closter horseman” is this: Technically, there was a horseman. His name was Lieutenant John Clifford. And he was from Hunterdon County. The area from where he spotted the British was generally known as Closter. But his ride went through today’s Englewood Cliffs to Fort Lee – six miles from present-day Closter.

And so, the borough – being the last recognized remnant of the larger Closter region – not only retains the name, but also preserves the history of the larger area by remembering it. Therefore, there is a responsibility to tell the whole truthful story of how large Closter once was, the name of “the Closter horseman,” and where he made his ride.

⁶⁷ Nelson, Eric, “On His Lordship’s Mysterious Ascent,” *Cliff Notes*, visitor’s newsletter for the Palisades Interstate Park in New Jersey, November 1998. Retrieved from: <<https://njpalisades.org/hislordshipsmysteriousascent/>>.