



Cranbury Post Office and Staff in 1950 (Cranbury Historical and Preservation Society)

Little is known of the early history of Middlesex Lodge No. 90 as water damaged many of the fraternity's records stored in the basement of the building. Perhaps little information survives because of the secretive nature of the Odd Fellows. Nonetheless, in 1931 almost 50 Cranbury women joined together to establish the Lady May Rebekah Lodge No. 94, the sister organization to Middlesex Lodge No. 90. Both benevolent societies undertook civic duties and supported community causes in Cranbury. The Odd Fellows did so for almost 150 years. Until they disbanded in the last years of the 1990s, the fraternity was the oldest of the town's organizations.

Though membership dwindled over the years, both the Odd Fellows and the Lady May Rebekah lodges still met in the I.O.O.F. Hall until the closing of the 20th century. In 2000 only one Odd Fellow remained in Cranbury. The order sold the hall to a private owner who converted the entire building into office space for Richard Grubb & Associates, a cultural resources consulting firm. As architectural historians and archaeologists, history, preservation, and a sense of place are important to us and we are delighted to work in the adaptively reused Odd Fellows Hall in the village of Cranbury.

Why the Names “Odd Fellow” and “Rebekah?”

While the origin of the name, Odd Fellows, is not known, several theories exist about its derivation. The oldest explanation is that fraternities of working men associated in the cause of helping their fellowship was so uncommon in England during the 1700s that people found the group “peculiar” or “odd.” Another explanation is that the original Odd Fellows engaged in various or “odd” trades, instead of a particular trade associated with an exclusive organization like the original Freemasons. Today, most references state that the name's origin is unknown.

The Rebekah Lodge follows the principles of Odd Fellows, as well as values learned from the stories of women in the Old Testament, including Rebekah (affection), Ester (patriotism), Sarah (faith), Deborah (courage), and Miriam (zeal and devotion). Likely, Rebekah was selected for the lodge's namesake as she symbolized unselfishness more than the other women did when she ministered to a poor, unknown stranger instead of only her loved ones.



Odd Fellows Hall c. 1940

(Images of America: Cranbury)

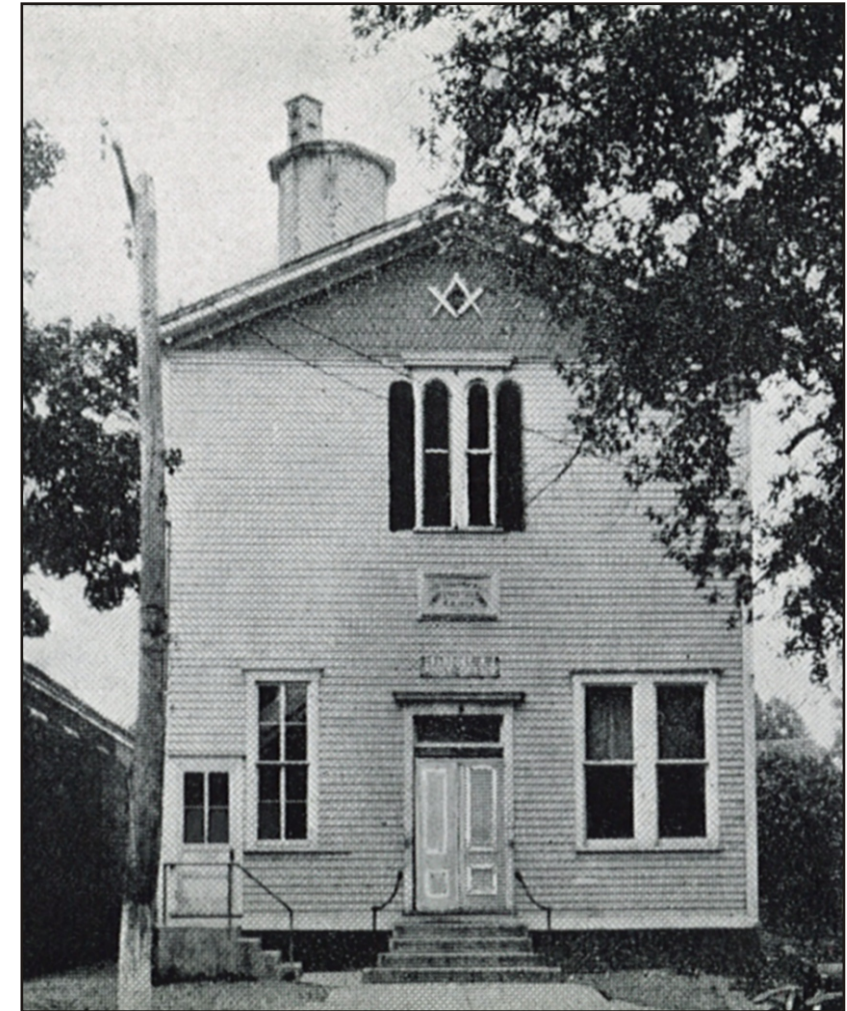
Compare the historic photographs of the Odd Fellows Hall with the building today. What is different? What is the same?

Do you see anything else in the photographs that has changed from the past?

Special thanks to the Cranbury Historical and Preservation Society for research assistance.

Richard Grubb & Associates, 30 North Main Street, Cranbury, NJ 08512
(609)655-0692

ODD FELLOWS HALL Cranbury, New Jersey



Odd Fellows Hall c. 1936

In 1889 the Middlesex Lodge No. 90 of the International Order of the Odd Fellows constructed the Cranbury Odd Fellows Hall. Local fraternal organizations, including the Freemasons, the Eastern Star, and the Lady May Rebekah Lodge, also used the second floor meeting room into the late 1900s (*A Brief Story of Apollo Lodge No. 156 F.&A.M of Cranbury, New Jersey*).

Fraternity Origins

The Independent Order of the Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.) trace their roots to a fraternal organization in England established prior to 1745. A secret society for the working man, they originally met in London taverns and combined these social gatherings with benevolent acts, such as collecting money or providing lodging for an unemployed or destitute member.

In 1819 several English Odd Fellows established the American origins of the I.O.O.F. with the institution of Washington Lodge No. 1 in Baltimore, Maryland. The I.O.O.F. created the Rebekah Lodge for female family members of living or deceased Odd Fellows in 1851 and became the first national fraternity to include both men and women. In the late nineteenth century membership rivaled the Masons, the largest fraternity in the U.S., and by 1915 it reached its peak of 3,400,000 members. Membership quickly fell throughout the 20th century, particularly after the Great Depression.

Principles and Duties

Maintaining their benevolent beginnings, the I.O.O.F. serve their fellow man by following the principal tenets of Friendship, Love, and Truth (FLT). Their main duties are to “visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead, and educate the orphan.” Today, many of the original duties of the Odd Fellows are now obsolete resulting from longer life spans and better occupational safety standards coupled with government assistance programs such as Social Security, unemployment benefits, public assistance, low-income housing, and meals on wheels. Although membership income housing, and meals on wheels has substantially declined, the Odd

The Goat

Just before construction of the new Odd Fellow's Hall, the *Cranbury Press* wittily reported that the meeting room was so small that “if the 'Goat' should become [unruly] in performing his part in an initiation, there [was] a danger of him butting his brains out, or doing serious injury to the membership.”



Phoenix Masonry Museum (www.phoenixmasonry.org)

Fellows and the Rebekahs now sponsor organizations such as Boy and Girl Scouts and continue to visit the sick in hospitals and nursing homes and to provide scholarships and loans to college students.

Symbols and Rituals of Secret Societies

Secret societies use symbols to instruct and to symbolize the tenets of their organizations to their members. The Odd Fellows use many symbols similar to the Freemasons, while many reflect the Judeo-Christian nature of the fraternity. Below are some symbols and their representations.



The **All-Seeing Eye** is symbolic of the omniscience of God.

The **Three Links** represents Friendship, Love, and Truth.

The **Heart and Hand** are incentives to love and mercy.

The **Bible** is a source of truth.

The **Bundle of Rods** is an emblem of strength in union.

The Rebekah Lodge use the **Beehive** to represent order and Industry, the **Dove** as an emblem of peace, and the **Lily** as a symbol of purity.

[Http://www.mill-valley.freemasonry.biz](http://www.mill-valley.freemasonry.biz)

Can you find any of the symbols used by the Odd Fellows on the hall in Cranbury?

Odd Fellow members undergo secret rituals during initiation and as they progress through the ranks of the society. Heavily influenced by the Masons, the Odd Fellow initiation ritual involves putting a blindfolded candidate in chains and forming a mock funeral procession. The candidate is brought face to face with a skeleton, and when the blindfold is removed he is invited to meditate upon death. A humorous initiation ritual popular with Odd Fellows is the blindfolded riding of the mechanical goat in front of his new brothers. New lodge members also take vows never to communicate secret signs, tokens, handshakes, or passwords, or to pass on books or papers related to the secret works of the Order to anyone who is not an Odd Fellow.

Cranbury's Lodge

Cranbury residents established the Middlesex Lodge No. 90 of the I.O.O.F. in 1849. Forty years later, the Middlesex Lodge needed a larger meeting space and built the Odd Fellows Hall under a resolution not to exceed \$3000 in construction expenses. Inside, hardwood finished the first floor and dark wainscoting covered the second floor walls and ceilings. Before construction of the new hall, the DeWitt residence, a long, one-and-one-half-story house, stood on the lot.

As with many benevolent lodges, the first floor of the I.O.O.F. Hall was designed for public use and the second floor reserved for lodge meetings. Multiple social functions including dances, plays, variety and medicine shows, movies, and political caucuses occurred on the first floor into the early 20th century.

The local Freemason's Apollo Lodge No. 156, established in 1886, began renting a meeting room in the Odd Fellows Hall in 1889. In 1934 the Freemason's remodeled the lodge room by covering the original wainscoting with gypsum board ornamented with faux beams. Today, the second floor interior remains the same.

In 1910 the post office moved into the first level of the Odd Fellows Hall and operated at this location until 1971 when it moved to its current site at 65 North Main Street. Subsequently, the first floor served as a clock shop and as a travel agency.



The Odd Fellows Hall c. 1890, as originally constructed. The large group of people came to witness the installation of a vault at the neighboring bank (*Images of America: Cranbury*).