

# ***Public Buildings***

## **CIVIL WAR DRILL HALL**

The oldest public building still standing in Leonia is the **Civil War Drill Hall**, built in 1859, located on Grand Avenue at the foot of Oakdene Avenue. It was built on land donated by James Vreeland Moore, as an armory for munitions, mustering place for militia, and drill hall during inclement weather.



*Civil War Drill Hall, Grand Avenue at the foot of Oakdean Avenue  
(This photo was taken some time prior to the paving of Grand Ave in 1920.)*

The first company to drill there, and believed to have had a hand in its construction was the local volunteer militia, the Jersey Blues. During the Civil War it headquartered the 22nd Infantry Regiment, Company E which saw action at Chancellorsville and performed a rear-guard function during the Battle for Fredericksburg in 1863. In 1877 a unit from the Drill Hall was sent to Hoboken during the widespread railroad strike. When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Leonians from Company E assembled at the Drill Hall. They received advanced training at Sea Girt, New Jersey and Jacksonville, Florida, but none of the soldiers participated in active service overseas. By 1910, as more modern military facilities became available, the town used it for social events and later it

was turned into a carpentry shop. The building was 103 years old in 1962 when the English Neighborhood Historical Society voted to save it from extinction. A ten year restoration process ended in September 1976, when fire caused extensive damage, making the building no longer habitable and that year it had been placed on the National Register of Historical Places. In 1993, it became the new home for the Players Guild of Leonia, and has been renamed the Civil War Drill Hall Theatre.

## **TRAIN STATION**

Another public facility, also built in 1859, was the **Train Station** located several blocks to the north on Fort Lee Road below Grand Avenue. No photo exists of that first train station. The earliest image of a train station is from the postcard collection. This station, built in 1880, was located on the northside of Fort Lee Road.



*Train Station, north side of Fort Lee Road, 1880*

It was demolished in 1918 when a handsome new station was built on the southside of Fort Lee Road on Station Parkway. It was paid for by the Erie Lackawanna Railroad Company, one of its executives, Albert Stone, lived in Leonia.



*Train Station, Station Parkway south side of Fort Lee Road, 1918*

The Borough laid out a park around the station. With the coming of the Northern Railroad the town's commercial center developed along lower Fort Lee Road. The railroad took Leonia beyond its village status and brought an influx of new residents from the city. According to an Erie Lackawanna Northern timetable, passenger service was still available in Leonia as late as 1966. The station was destroyed by fire in the 1970's.

### **BOROUGH MARSHAL/POLICE DEPARTMENT**

At the first council meeting held on January 21, 1895, a year after the Borough was incorporated, the position of **Borough Marshal** was established with four deputy marshals who served on a voluntary basis. A cage to be used to keep the "unrulies" in line was requested and installed in the carriage house on the marshal's property. In 1899 a Marshal's office was located on the second floor of a building on the northside of Fort Lee Road below Grand Avenue. In the early days patrolling was not considered necessary, but the desire for more adequate protection led a group of citizens to employ the marshal to inspect their properties at regular intervals. On June 10, 1918, the Borough adopted an ordinance creating a **Police Department**, a police chief and three patrolmen were sworn in. The first automobile the department purchased was a 1920 Ford Model-T convertible along with an Indian motorcycle and sidecar.



*Fire House/2nd Floor Police Station, Fort Lee Road  
below Grand Avenue, 1898*



*Police Station, adjacent to Wood Park, 1944*

### **LEONIA VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT**

The **Leonia Volunteer Fire Department** was authorized by the mayor and council in 1898. It was located downstairs in the same building as the Police Department. In 1899 members of Company #1, at their own expense, purchased a horse drawn hose wagon to replace the hand drawn version, which is still maintained along with the hook and ladder that was pulled with drag ropes. A second firehouse was built on Irving Street to protect the southeast portion of the Borough known as “Leonia Heights”. In 1912, a fire broke out in the building which housed the Borough’s municipal offices as well. (The building was completely destroyed by fire in 1986). Although badly damaged and subsequently repaired, the Borough purchased land in the center of town on Boro Place adjacent to Wood Park that would, some twenty years later, become the second home for the police and fire departments.



*Fire House, adjacent to Wood Park, 1932*

## MUNICIPAL OFFICES/ BOROUGH HALL

Leonia was incorporated as a Borough in November of 1894. The following year a few rooms above the Fire Department served as **municipal offices**. Town meetings were held in rented space up the street at the Lyceum.



*Leonia Lyceum, Fort Lee Road opposite Spring Street, circa 1885-1914*

The Wood Homestead, once occupied by Leonia's fourth mayor Robert J.G. Wood, was purchased by the Borough in 1923 and served as the **Borough Hall** for the next thirty years.



*Wood Homestead, Fort Lee Road, 1920's*

Municipal offices were housed on the first floor, the library occupied the second floor, and the police department was in the basement. In 1930 a former garage adjacent to the east side of Wood Park was converted into facilities for the Police and Fire Departments. The municipal offices moved into its current home, the former telephone exchange building, in 1953 located on Broad Avenue south of Fort Lee Road.



*The Telephone Exchange Building, built in 1911, became the current home of Borough Hall in 1953.*

## **LIBRARY**

A 1916 brochure found in the archives states “the need of a Public Library in Leonia was presented to the Housewives’ League (later to become the Women’s Club) in September 1914”. Following a visit from the New Jersey Library Commission, an appeal was made to the Men’s Neighborhood Club for co-operation. On May 3, 1915 the Leonia Public Library was organized. That first library was located in the real estate office of Edward Paulin on the southwest corner of Broad Avenue and Fort Lee Road.



*Leonia Public Library, Fort Lee Road, 1923-1969*

The shelves were furnished and put in place by the Men's Neighborhood Club. The Library moved to larger quarters further north at 452 Broad Avenue near Hillside Avenue to a small wooden building which once served as John Peck's lunch room for trolley passengers it is now Giuliett's beauty supplies. In 1923 the library moved into the second floor of the Borough Hall located in the former Wood homestead on Fort Lee Road.

When the municipal offices relocated to the present Borough Hall on Broad Avenue in 1953, the Library occupied the entire building. By 1967 library patronage increased and the collection had grown. At this point, the Borough Council and the Library Board made plans for a new building. On October 19, 1969 a modern building replaced the Wood homestead on Fort Lee Road. The Library had begun as a private voluntary enterprise, in 1923 the town voted to support it with public funds.



*Leonia Public Library, Fort Lee Road, 1969*