

# A FORM *of* DOCTOR



RECOLLECTIONS OF MARVIN STEMPEL







A  
FORM  
*of* DOCTOR

*Recollections of Marvin Stemple*

THE HOBOKEN  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

VANISHING HOBOKEN  
*The Hoboken Oral History Project*

A project of  
The Friends of the Hoboken Public Library  
and the Hoboken Historical Museum

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the interviewer, the Hoboken Oral History Project and its coordinators, the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library, the Hoboken Historical Museum, or the New Jersey Historical Commission.

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MARVIN STEMPLE  
*March 10, 2001*



## Introduction

### Marvin Stemple

**M**arvin Stemple, born in 1923 at 624 Park Avenue in Hoboken, was a second generation pharmacist. In 2001, when this interview was conducted, he was still working at the same family-owned store, Stemple Pharmacy, 266 Seventh Street (corner of Willow Avenue). His father, Louis, opened the pharmacy in 1929—one of twenty-three neighborhood pharmacies in the city. In the intervening years, the pharmacy business changed significantly. So did the Hoboken population served by Stemple Pharmacy. In 2004, Marvin retired and closed the family business.

This chapbook contains quotes from an interview conducted by Phyllis Plitch at the pharmacy on March 10, 2001. It was produced as part of the Hoboken Oral History Project, a joint project of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum, with support from the New Jersey Historical Commission. The original transcript and tape have been deposited at the Hoboken Public Library.





## A Neighborhood Pharmacy in a City of Neighborhoods

**W**e've been here since 1929, when my father, Louis, who owned this business, bought the building during the Depression. The ceiling and the side cases are from 1929, and the metal ceiling is from '29. Everything else has been revamped. [The front was re-done in] 1976.

I'm second generation American. My father came from Brooklyn, and my mother came from Islip. They were born here. My father was Romanian/Austrian and my mother, similar—Hungarian. My grandfather, who lived with us, maybe until I was five years old, he was a Russian Jew.

My father went to the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy, then moved to Park Avenue in Hoboken, where my brother and I were born, and worked in this pharmacy here, I guess forever. Why, when, I don't know.

He worked here alone, from eight in the morning to ten in the evening, six days a week, and half a day on Sunday. He had previously worked for C.O. Dehne Pharmacy, which was across the street. He had worked there about ten years, probably from 1920.

This store had been a Butler, which was the A&P of its time. The Butler moved across the street, to where the former pharmacy was.





I was born in '23, so I remember being in a carriage outside the backroom door, across the street. I was a couple years old. We bought the store in 1929, and moved here onto the first floor. The family did. That was my brother, my mother and my father.

The other two floors—there were three floors all together—were rented out, and they were heated by coal. We had a coal bin on Willow Avenue, right outside the store. They would order the coal, it would be filled in, and they put a lock on it. There were three bins. The store was heated by oil at that time, and the first floor, where we

lived, was heated by oil. But the other two apartments, they couldn't afford oil at that time.

My brother, Arthur, who was six years older than me, would work in the store, and as I grew up, I worked in the store. He's passed away, twenty years ago. He worked in the store—delivery boy, cleaning—and I did the same thing, for many years, right through high school.

It was strictly a neighborhood store—which all of them were. But at that time, even though Hoboken only occupied three-quarters of its space—and the other quarter was manufacturing—it was a very, very “neighborhoody” store. The clientele was very closely knit; the families were closely knit. The major ethnic people were the Italians, the Irish and the Germans, for many, many, many years.

It was never a busy store. There were two or three competitive stores that were much busier. But my father was satisfied with what he did. It kept him busy.

Everything in those days was compounded. Even I, at the beginning of my career, was compounding medications. Most of the compounding consisted of mixing—the simplest ones being cough medicines—with each physician having their own particular combination.

The doctors knew more about this then. They're not aware of this now, because, basically, all the medicines are prepared by manufacturers, with the preparations in them. But if the doctor wanted a stronger amount of codeine, he would write that particular amount. Expectorants we added to the cough medicines, usually pine tar, and the basic flavor would be syrup of cherry. All these things were bought or made. Simple cherry syrup, you made at that time. Then eventually the manufacturers prepared them.

Each prescription took much more







time. The labels were all written out; you didn't use a typewriter for many years. Those were the simple medicines. The more difficult ones were the mixture of the ointments, where the base would either be cold cream or Vaseline, and then you have any number of preparations for whatever the condition was. That was put on a slab, mixed with a spatula, and then placed in an ointment jar. The other medications were mostly capsules, and in the capsules—for fever, colds, aches or pains—we'd mix up aspirin, and a couple of other drugs that were discontinued later on, because they were found to be noxious. But they were very effective at the time.

For instance, phenacetin was an anti-pyretic; it was an analgesic, and something for fever. It was in many preparations, and it was in many preparations over the counter. One of them was Bromo-Seltzer. That's why it was so effective. But it affected the kidney and the liver, in large doses.

Heroin and cocaine went out about the '30s, probably. I never filled a heroin or cocaine prescription, but my father did. It wasn't common, but it was used for pain. Or cough. Instead of codeine—which was sufficient—they [might] use the heroin or the cocaine. This was a Schedule II drug. Now we can't buy it, basically, or order it. There are five classes of drugs, and the Schedule II drug is the most controlled one.

## A Form of Doctor

Most pharmacists were a form of doctor, and I did [things that doctors do] when I became a pharmacist. I took specks out of your eye—which, of course, is illegal now, but I was very good at it. People wouldn't go to their doctor, or couldn't afford a doctor. They would come in for cough medicines that were prepared, for different types of pain relievers that were on the market.

My father, by the immigrants, was always referred to as "Doctor." All the pharmacists were.

I think more than anything else they would come in to check with my father how sick they were, because they couldn't afford the doctor. Many, many were Italian immigrants, who worked down on the docks, on the waterfront. A great deal of them were friends of mine, eventually, because I grew up with these guys.

## Hoboken's Jewish Community

I was born at 624 Park Avenue, so there was a little circle around here that I have been associated with, until I moved to Maywood, New Jersey, after I was married, in 1951. We moved there in 1956.





*Adas Emuno, Hoboken's Reformed Synagogue, Garden Street, circa 1900.*

FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE HOBOKEN PUBLIC LIBRARY.

The major part of my childhood—I'm Jewish, and most of the boys were Italian or German or Irish—I was the only Jewish boy in this group. I played ball with them. My best friends were the Italian boys. Their fathers were working on the docks and in construction, whether it was in Hoboken or New York. I had a very close friend whose whole family worked in construction. He had five brothers, and they all would work. A few of them never graduated high school. They quit at fifth or sixth grade to work, because they had to make a living for their family.

But, of course, I also went out with the ones I belonged to the synagogue with, which was Adas Emuno. That was on Garden Street between Seventh and Eighth, then. It was a Reformed synagogue. That was the smaller one here, but there were two larger synagogues downtown on Hudson Street, that were Orthodox or Conservative. This was more Reform.

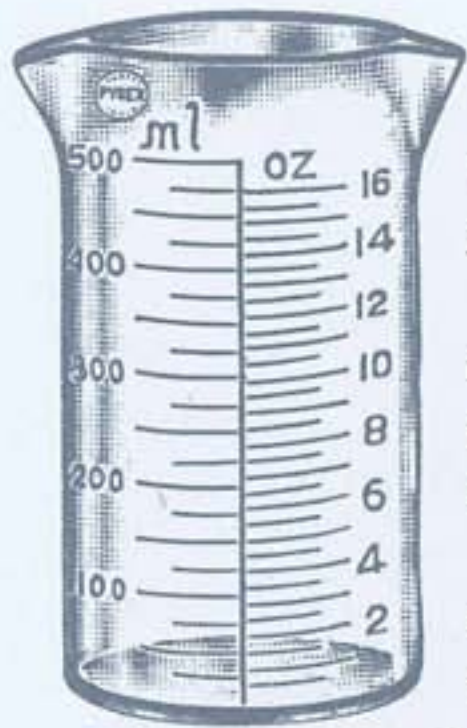
There was a big Orthodox community. A lot of the merchants downtown, on First Street, all had stores, and they were Jewish. And Washington Street, also. But I was working so long, I didn't become a part of any community, basically. In other words, my father was here sixty, seventy hours a week. Our biggest thing was on Sunday afternoon to go to a restaurant, Schwartz's, Second and Third on Washington Street. Then we would go to the Fabian movie theater, where CVS is now.

## Family Drugstores, Family Doctors

There were no supermarket pharmacies. There was a Hoboken Pharmaceutical Association, with twenty-three pharmacists. At Fourth and Adam was the Albin Pharmacy. That's the oldest one here. His son was—and still is—a doctor, on Fourth Street. Ninth and Willow was either called Seligman's Pharmacy or Willow Pharmacy. Eli Seligman was my father's age, and they were competitors and friends and everything else. There was another store on Washington Street called Kidorf's Pharmacy, which my father was friendly with.

They formed a type of communication where two stores opened on a Sunday, all day, until 6:00 or so, and they posted a card in the window (they had them made up for each store), saying which was open. One every thirteen weeks, approximately, they would be open. Most of them would be open at 9 a.m. That store would stay





open until 7:00 or 8:00. There was always someone, somewhere to get medication at the time. Many a time my father's bell was rung at 2:00 in the morning.

And the doctors made house calls then. If he couldn't make a house call he would say, "Run over," because they lived there. They all practically lived in the same house they practiced in.

I remember myself, I was quite affected by ear infections, and we would have to call this Doctor Pflugh, up on Hudson Street, who was an ear man, in the middle of the night. We'd go up there and he would puncture my ear. I remember that very well. That happened a number of times. I was "conductive" to middle ear infections. There were family doctors like there were family drugstores.

I graduated in June of 1940. I was fifteen years old. I happened to start school at four. So by sixteen I was in college. I was just a baby then. I went to Rutgers College of Pharmacy in Newark. The war was on, and they gave us a deferment to graduate. So we went—my class, particularly—went through four years in three (no summer vacation), right through. I graduated college at nineteen, and the next month I was twenty. In three months I was in the service, from 1943, when I graduated, until '46.

I was in a medical department, and went to Germany and France, and back to Germany. We were shipped to France when the war ended in Germany. The war in Japan was still going on, and we were sitting in a camp there. That ended, so they shipped us back to Germany for another six months. I got out in '46, in June.

Then I was recalled into service for the Korean campaign. They needed a pharmacist at Walter Reade Hospital, so I went there for a year. That's where I met my wife, in Washington, D.C. So it took two wars to meet her.



*One of Hoboken's many pharmacies, circa 1900.*

FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE HOBOKEN PUBLIC LIBRARY.

I had to take my internship—which I did at different pharmacies—and then take the exam. In 1947 I became a registered pharmacist, which made me go from a three-dollar man—that's what they paid the interns an hour.

I did all the pharmacy work, but I was under the governorship of at least one pharmacist. I didn't do my technician work in Hoboken. I worked at another store, in Jersey City. Then we worked together here for a number of years.





My father passed away in 1960. I worked alone for many years; then I had part-time help. It was getting busy. All the stores were getting busier after the war.

People came back and had money. The fellas in the service saved money—discharge money. We had more physicians.

Then penicillin came out. We were in Germany, I think that must have been the end of '44 or '45, the services got it. It was allocated to the public in small amounts. It would be in vials and you would make up solutions with it. Then became the tablet form. They kept getting better, with different combinations. Then other antibiotics followed.

## How Hoboken Was

Of course, there were a lot of local shops, butcher shops and fish stores. That's where everybody bought. You had to be brain-washed to go to a supermarket. It just wasn't accepted. There was a live chicken store down the block, on Second Street and Willow, that

had live chickens. You would pick out the chicken, and he would kill it for you. You would wait there and he'd take the feathers off and give it back to you. He'd go into the back room, slit its throat, let it drip, put it in hot water and take off the feathers. And everybody bought the chickens that way, before it was packaged. It was years before my mother would accept the chickens in the supermarket.

And the pharmacy business, later in the '50s, really started to become much more drug-oriented. That's what really made it popular. The drugs were getting much more beneficial.

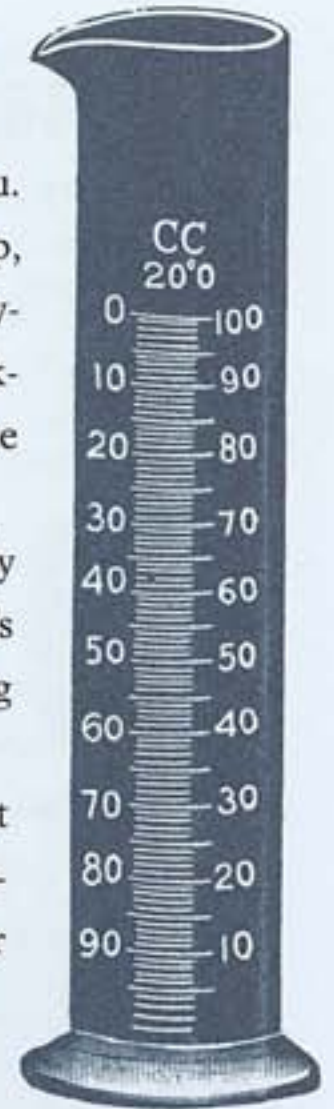
Families had more children then. But that's not now. In this particular area they're not family oriented. The people who have moved in, in the last ten or fifteen years, don't have families. Or, if they do, within three or four years they move out.

That was radical. Radical. We always had more children then, or treated more children. I remember treating more children, growing up with them. I grew up with their parents, and here I was, treating their children, until '85 or something. Then when Hoboken gentrified itself, the yuppies moved in, and they became two or three in a \$1,000, two-room apartment, they lived here but they didn't shop that much

here.

What happened to our population. . .

Let me put it this way. Hobokenites disappeared. The enterprising men bought their houses and condo-ed them, gave them a great offer, and they moved out. And that's where we got the young couples coming in here.





## STOKES' EXPECTORANT, N. F.

Alcohol 10 to 12%.

Each fluid ounce contains 0.322 grains of powdered Opium.

WARNING—May be habit forming.

For Coughs Due to Colds.

DIRECTIONS—Adults, 1 teaspoonful every 3 hours. Do not give to children except on the advice of a physician.

Shake Well Before Using.

CAUTION—If cough is persistent consult a physician.

Keep this and all Medicines out of the Reach of Children.

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THE STORE OF PERSONAL SERVICE

### The Pharmacy Today

Medicine has progressed past the pharmacy stage. Pharmacy now is more consultation, making sure that we don't make any mistakes. Because the medicines are so powerful they can counteract each other, and this is what we have to be wary of. Our memory, and our computer helps us with this.

We were forced to get computers, because third-party prescriptions were sent through the computer in a telephonic way, and if you didn't do it, you had to do hard copy—which we did at the beginning, and that was tedious.

The only thing that basically keeps us alive is that we deliver and pick up, and we're there. We're still there. I have a great many older people here. They've been coming here for many years. I have people, who have moved away, who still come back—Union City, Jersey City. You build up friendships. But it's much more difficult to make a living. I don't know how many of the twenty-three stores—with attrition and things, they've passed away and things like that—but they were

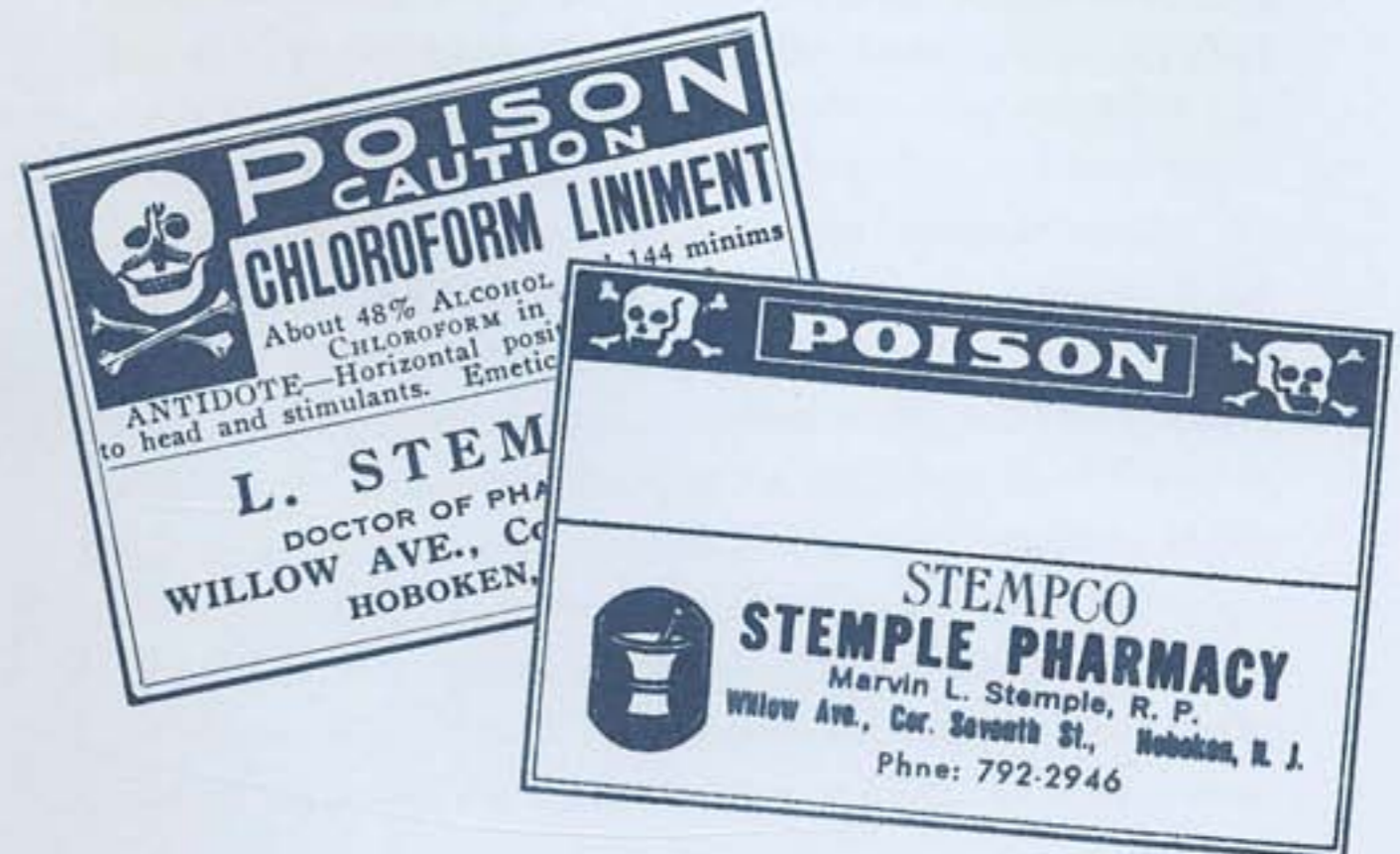
driven out of business because of third-party, a number of them.

I had three clerks who worked here as delivery boys and everything. Three of them were pharmacists. Each one had a store. They work for Rite Aid, CVS, Pathmark. They were younger so they could do it, but I couldn't. It was very difficult for one gentleman, who's a little older, to adapt. Because these stores really wear you out. You don't get enough help. You're doing 100-200 prescriptions a day by yourself.

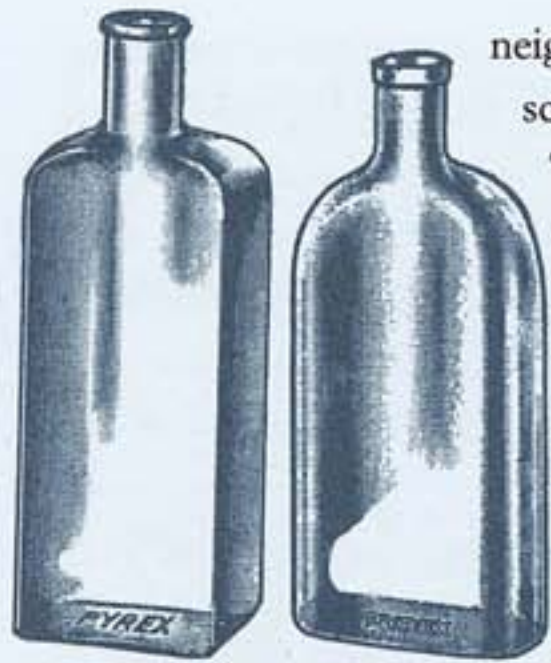
Right now I work a lot because my pharmacist, that I had here, who was eighty years old, passed away last November. He went to school with me; he was a year ahead of me at Rutgers, so I've known him for fifty years. And he would give me two days a week. He loved to work. He shouldn't have been working. He was not well, but he just loved to work. Hugo Palmitessa. He lived in Cliffside Park, and he had a store in Cliffside Park. So he retired from there, and worked in different stores a couple days a week, here and there.

I'm here, because it keeps me busy. I'm seventy-seven now.

[Eventually,] I'll retire. No one will buy this store. No one buys







neighborhood drugstores. I'll sell my prescriptions to some local store, or CVS. They usually buy you out, and the prescriptions go to these particular stores, and you can get your prescription filled there. I'd rent the storefront out.

I really enjoyed my camaraderie in this place here. I developed a lot of friends, close. Just the other day I had one from Bayonne, whom I haven't seen in ten years. But she calls me up for advice, here and there, and always sends me a card for the holidays, for my birthday, and everything else. And she always writes such a nice message on all of these. I had someone call me the other day saying, "You saved my life," because of whatever I did for her. A young person. She couldn't get to the doctor. So this is what makes it go for me.

I have customers who remember my dad. My mother and dad used to sit outside the store, when it was quiet. There were times when there was nothing to do. Up and down people would [walk and say]: "Hello, Doc."

## The Hoboken Oral History Project

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding 20 years, and to the consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated during the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go econ-



omy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as anonymous, modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of Cultural Affairs in the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited seven oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. During 2002 and 2004, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, provided support for the publication of three chapbooks. The printing of two more were supported by the New Jersey Historical Commission in 2004 and 2005.

## Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chooses to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

*“small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.”*

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material



continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the "Vanishing Hoboken" series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.



A Project of The Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and  
the Hoboken Historical Museum