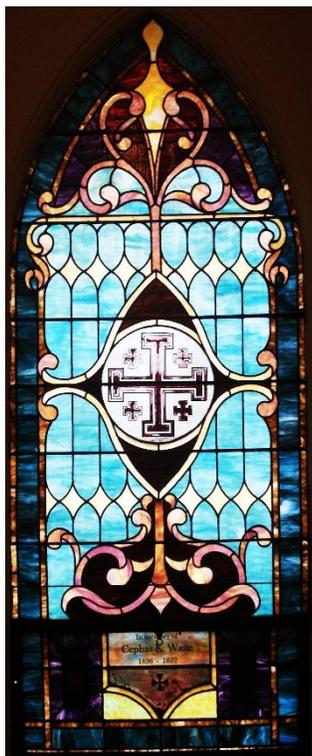


## Windows With A Story – “Captain” Cephas K. Waite

**Father of Mrs. George Silzer (wife of NJ Governor George S. Silzer)**

By Ted Latham



“Captain” Cephas K. Waite served in the United States Navy from January 30, 1864 through May 15, 1867, the date of his honorable discharge. Although official Navy records indicate that his rank was that of an ensign, when he returned to Metuchen he somehow became known as “Captain” Waite. Fenton’s “History of St. Luke’s” records him among one of the founders of our Church. Together with his new wife, the former Frederica Fidelia Benner of Maine, they helped raise the money needed to build St. Luke’s. Their family of six children grew up in a fine Italianate style house. A house that still exists at 31 Clive Street. Cephas and Frederica are buried in the cemetery associated with the First Presbyterian Church in Metuchen. The window memorializing “Captain” Waite, who died on May 31, 1892, may be viewed at the back corner of the Church.



**The Waite Home**

On April 20, 1898, the Waites’ third child, Henrietta Thomas Waite, was married in a ceremony at St. Luke’s to George Sebastian Silzer, a young lawyer from New Brunswick. He and his new bride settled into their new home at 79 Graham Avenue in Metuchen. Their only child, Parker Waite Silzer, arrived April 20, 1900. From his home in Metuchen, Mr. Silzer commuted to his law offices in New Brunswick from the original Metuchen Train Station on Lake Avenue.



**The Silzer’s home in Metuchen**

Prior to his move to Metuchen, Silzer opened his office for practicing law in New Brunswick right after he was admitted to the bar in 1892, and very quickly got involved in local politics. Also in 1892, at the age of 21, he was elected to the New Brunswick Board of Aldermen and remained in that position until 1896. At this time he advanced to the chairmanship of the Middlesex County Democratic Party. After his ten year stint as County Chairmen he was elected to the state senate in 1906, and reelected by a more popular margin in 1910. During his senate years he was in the forefront of “Democratic Progressivism” advancing causes relating to work place reforms, environmental preservation, women’s and children’s rights, and support for the working class.



**President Wilson**

In 1910 he announced his candidacy for the governorship of NJ advancing his progressive views and anti-political machine platform. At the state Democratic convention he challenged Woodrow Wilson for the nomination and lost. However he did defeat the powerful and longtime Hudson County party boss Frank Hague who also wanted to be governor. Silzer found favor with Governor Wilson as one of his chief lieutenants in the legislature and eventually appointed him to the position of “prosecutor of pleas” for Middlesex



County in 1912. After Wilson vacated the governor’s office to become President of the United States, his successor, Governor James F. Fielder appointed Silzer as a circuit court judge. He served as judge until 1922,

at which time the Democrats finally chose Silzer as their nominee for governor of New Jersey in the next election.

He campaigned to advance his democratic progressive views, claiming it was time to “put government back into the hands of the people.” He also added his opposition to the unpopular, ineffective, and crime promoting federal alcohol prohibition laws, such as the Volstead Act, that supported the recently enacted 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution. Perhaps he also thought it was a good time to “put beer back into the hands of the people.” He had no trouble getting financial support for his campaign. With the help of “Boss” Frank Hague in Hudson County who controlled the north Jersey Democrat machine. Silzer soundly defeated his Republican opponent, William N. Runyon. Runyon was frequently labeled as the “dry” candidate during the campaign.



In January 1923, Judge George S. Silzer, a St. Luke’s vestryman at the time, took office as the Governor of New Jersey. The inaugural event did put an unfavorable spotlight on a sermon given by our Rector at the time that was misinterpreted by the press. According to Paul F. Fenton’s 1968 “History of St. Luke’s,”:

*“In his sermon of January 14, 1923 Dr. Fenton (St. Luke’s Rector and Paul Fenton’s Father) alluded to the forthcoming inauguration and in citing national problems stated:*

*“The Volstead Act is not necessarily divine or even sacrosanct. Like most legislation it has feet of clay. The same legislative body that enacted it can repeal it. Citizens have the privilege of assembling peaceably, organizing, airing their objections, on the public platform and through the mails, criticizing the act, doing everything **except violate it.**”*

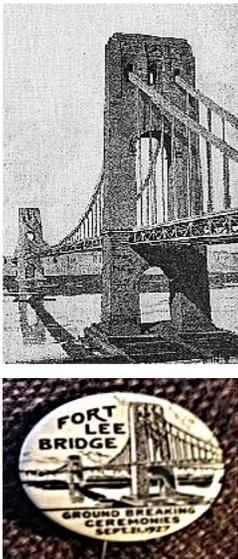
The press ignored the phrase “**except violate it,**” and suggested that the new Governor’s spiritual leader was calling for an outright repeal of Prohibition. The press published their summary of what they believed to be an inappropriate threat in Fenton’s sermon to our system of government:

*“the heresy that law is simply the creature of one’s personal tastes or preferences would subvert government and bring in anarchy.”*

Apparently the misrepresentation of Fenton’s sermon made one parishioner, Walter Molineaux, mad enough so that he published in the press, at his own expense, a statement that clarified Fenton’s meaning. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment would eventually be repealed after Silzer’s term of office on December 5, 1933.

While governor, Silzer dismantled some state government agencies, such as the corrupt state highway commission that provided lucrative appointments to political cronies. According to one of his biographers, *“His concern for transportation reflected his assessment of the state’s potential future development. Lying along waterways dominated by the neighboring ports of New York City and Philadelphia. New Jersey, he anticipated, would increasingly develop both commercial-industrial and residential facilities. The automobile, with its flexibility of route, would stimulate the growth of the state’s population and industry.”* The Republican controlled legislature offered successful resistance to many of Silzer’s initiatives that included new labor laws, the prevention of price gauging, reformation of the state prisons, expanded public welfare, providing fairer

methods for taxation, imposition of greater control over narcotics, effective gun controls laws, support for anti-lynching laws, and the restoration of New Jersey's polluted rivers. Silzer became known as the "Veto Governor" because he used this power frequently to try to stop Republican initiatives. He supported planned construction of highways throughout the state and suggested the forerunner of the Port Authority of NY and NJ. This Authority would manage the commerce and traffic throughout our common ports including the Holland Tunnel and Silzer's proposal to build two bridges between Staten Island and New Jersey. Representatives from both states would share equally in the rational development of the port and in the management of this new Authority.



Another forward looking achievement credited to Governor Silzer was his proposal to build a bridge between Fort Lee NJ and Washington Heights in NYC. Before he left office he was given the honor to preside over the ground breaking ceremony of what would be named the "George Washington Bridge" on September 27, 1927. Prior to the groundbreaking, some Jerseyans were campaigning to name it the "Fort Lee Bridge." He was also given a position of honor at the opening of the bridge on October 25, 1931. When the bridge was first designed it was to be completed with a granite structure enclosing the upright supports as shown in the design plan shown to the left. Due to the great depression and the lack of money, this plan was scrapped and the supports were left open. The photo to the right shows the opening day parade across the GW Bridge.



Opening Day

When Silzer had completed his term as governor and returned to his private law practice, his successor, Governor Moore, appointed him for one term as chairman of the Port of New York Authority. He continued to live in Metuchen and as a parishioner, he increased his participation in helping St. Luke's to grow. In 1935 he accepted the responsibility for raising \$10,000 (all in a week's time) to extend the Chancel. The addition provided a place for the choir to sit in pews facing each other toward the front of the chancel and the altar was pushed to the back wall. There was enough money to install a stained glass window over the altar memorializing the Rev. Dr. John F. Fenton, Rector of St. Luke's from 1899-1930, and died in January of 1932.



George S. Silzer

Also in 1935, after reestablishing his career as a lawyer, George Silzer became even more famous through his association with the infamous and notorious gangster, Arthur Flegenheimer, better known as "Dutch Schultz." Silzer represented Flegenheimer in the Federal Government's prosecution against him for income tax evasion. A much lesser crime than what this former gangster and bootlegger was alleged to have committed. The trial took place in Syracuse, New York and was prosecuted by the future 47<sup>th</sup> Governor of NY, Thomas E. Dewey. Dewey was also the future Republican



Arthur Flegenheimer "aka Dutch Schultz"



presidential candidate who unsuccessfully ran against President Harry Truman in 1948. Dutch Schultz was convicted and attempted to make a deal with the government to “rub out” rival mobster “Lucky Luciano.” The government declined the offer and Dutch’s luck went bad when Luciano had Dutch “rubbed out” in the “Chop House” in Hoboken before he had a chance to serve his time.

[New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey](#)

Silzer continued to practice law until he unexpectedly experienced a heart attack and died while walking on a Newark street heading on his way home to Metuchen from his office. At the age of 70, his death occurred on October 16, 1940. He was survived by his wife Henrietta T. Waite and his son Parker W. Silzer. Henrietta and Parker donated the desk that George Silzer used as Governor of New Jersey to St. Luke’s. The hand carved antique Florentine style wood desk can be seen in the foyer of Fryer Hall.

