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A Spatial History of Thomas Edison National Historical Park: Challenges and Opportunities

Melissa Benbow Flowers

ABSTRACT

This essay examines how the spatial history of Thomas Edison National Historical Park, New Jersey, reveals long-time tensions between exclusivity and public accessibility. At the center of this study is Glenmont, the Edison family home, located within Llewellyn Park—the nation's first gated residential community. While Llewellyn Park embodied 19th-century elite ideals of seclusion and pastoral retreat, residents like the Edison family operation relied upon the labor of predominantly female domestic workers and the industrial workforce at Edison's nearby laboratories. I draw on archival research, cultural landscape studies, and heritage theory to illuminate how class-based insulation at Llewellyn Park both obscured and depended on working-class labor. I argue that these dynamics continue to shape visitor experiences at Thomas Edison National Historical Park: the laboratories remain easily accessible on West Orange's Main Street, while seeing Glenmont requires a multistep, carefully managed process that deters casual visitation. This geography risks reinforcing cultural divides by privileging narratives of one person's inventions over those of the working-class labor that actualized those ideas. By situating Glenmont within broader debates on gated communities, universal design, and museum inclusivity, I propose strategies for interpreting the invisible labor that sustained Edison's household and for re-embedding the estate into its diverse local community. Ultimately, this essay calls for a reimagining of Glenmont not solely as a memorial to Edison's genius but as a site where histories of work, migration, and community belonging can be made visible and usable for contemporary audiences.

INTRODUCTION

In August of 2024, I relocated to New Jersey to begin a Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship with the National Park Service (NPS). My project, "The Lives of Domestic Workers at Glenmont, Thomas and Mina Edison's Home," was to examine six generations of predominantly female domestic workers in the Edison household, situating their experiences within broader social contexts. I was to use my research to develop interpretive resources for both the public and NPS staff.

Before my start date, I drove to Thomas Edison National Historical Park (TENHP) to see where I would be conducting my research. I previewed the site on Google Maps with the intention to see the Glenmont Estate and get acclimated to my new surroundings. As I got closer, I noticed that, unlike other historic houses I had visited in the Northeast, Glenmont was not visible from the street. Confronted by the gatehouse at the entrance to Llewellyn Park, I felt unsure about entering (Figure 1). I turned around, deciding to wait until my official first day to get an initial look at the home.

Once I started my fellowship, I learned that the Glenmont estate sits within Llewellyn Park, America's first gated community, founded in 1853. While Glenmont is enclosed in a privately governed landscape, Edison's laboratories stand just a mile away on Main Street, integrated into the urban fabric of West Orange (Figures 2–4). This stark contrast in geography reproduces a public/elite divide: Llewellyn Park was designed to insulate its residents from the environmental pollution and urban industrialization by which it was surrounded. Simultaneously, the working-class communities around the park were excluded from the environmental and social benefits this pastoral reservoir provided. The Edisons relied on that same community for labor—both within their household and in Thomas Edison's factory.

The paradox of physical exclusion alongside social and economic interdependence reveals how elite households were simultaneously insulated from and embedded in the socio-economic landscape of the Newark, New Jersey, region. As I search the archives for information about

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FIGURE 1. Exterior view of the Llewellyn Park Gatehouse. There is no sidewalk on this path. Source: Exterior view of the Llewellyn Park Gatehouse, OldHouses.com, listing no. 7287, accessed August 31, 2025, "Exterior," https://www.oldhouses.com/7287.

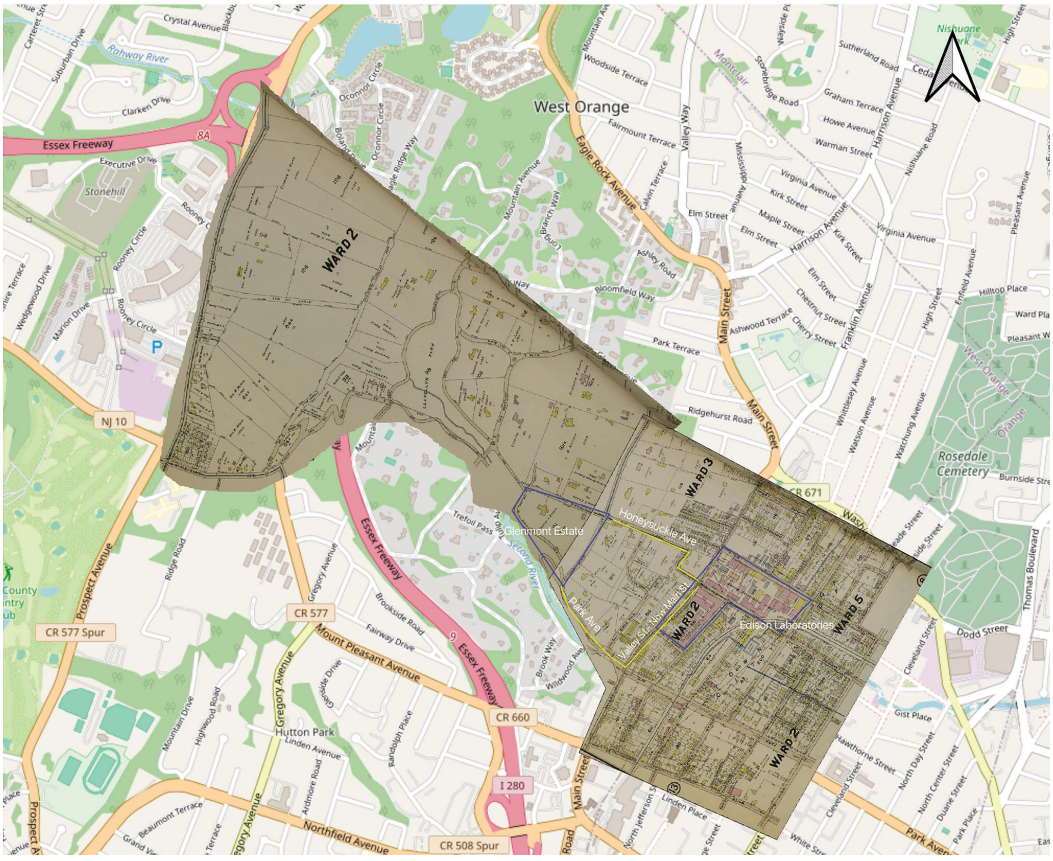

FIGURE 2. Overlay of Sheets 17 and 18 from the *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Orange, Essex County, New Jersey* (Sanborn Map Company, 1924), geo-referenced in QGIS. The map situates Thomas A. Edison's Glenmont Estate within Llewellyn Park (lower left) in relation to the Edison Laboratory complex and surrounding residential wards of West Orange. Source: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn05583_004/.

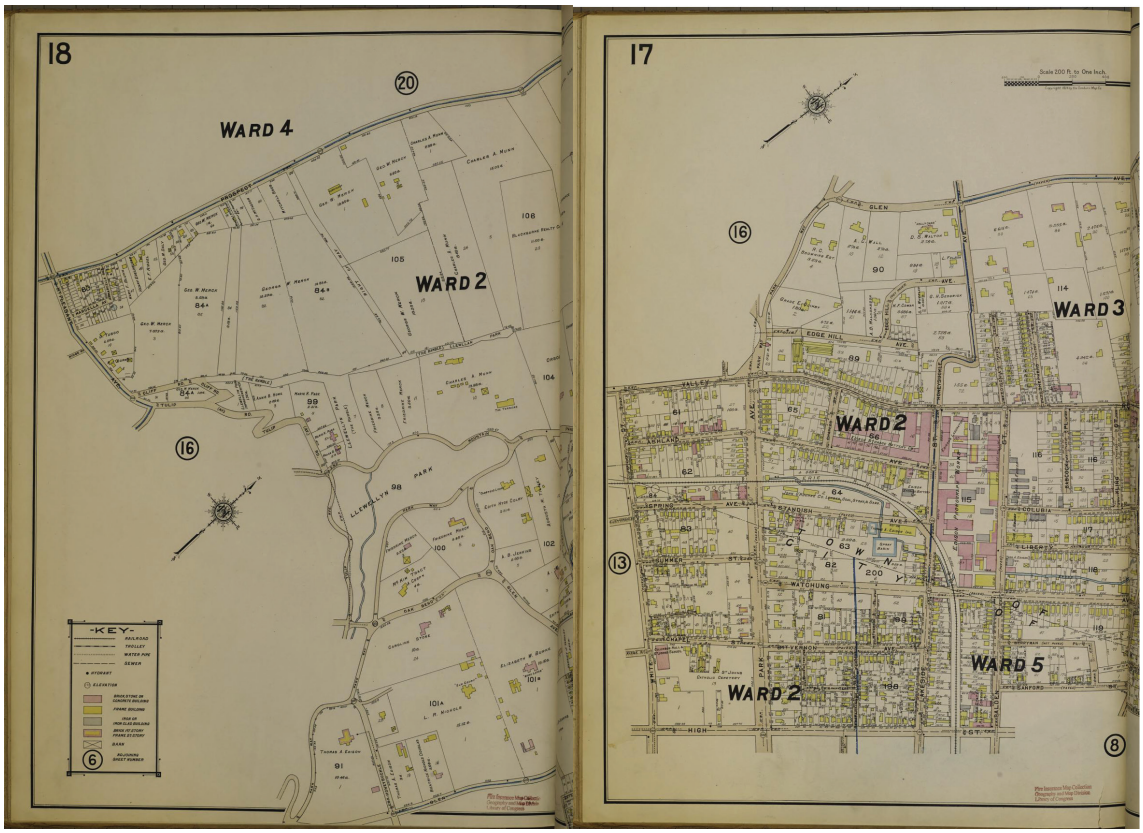

FIGURE 3. *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Orange, Essex County, New Jersey,* Sheets 18 and 17, Sanborn Map Company, 1924. In these maps, Sheet 18 extends north of Sheet 17. The Glenmont Estate appears near the bottom center of Sheet 18 within Llewellyn Park, while the Edison factories are situated roughly one sheet south, near the center of Sheet 17. Source: Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn05583_004/.

FIGURE 4. Contemporary base map of West Orange, New Jersey, showing the present-day locations of the NPS Glenmont Estate and the former Edison Laboratories. Modern street configurations and highway construction have altered the historical landscape—such as the removal of the connection between Honeysuckle Avenue and Valley Street (now Main Street)—changing the spatial relationship between the estate and the industrial site. Map created in QGIS using OpenStreetMap data (© OpenStreetMap contributors). Base data retrieved 2025.

the domestic workers of Glenmont, these challenges of segregated space take on deeper resonance. Also, the way I experience Glenmont as a physical space changes when I think about it as a space for work and rest, both interwoven with and distant from the owners of the home. Within the Glenmont home, the rooms on the back of the third floor, the back staircases, the kitchen, the butler's room, the servant's dining room, and the canning room were designated for domestic workers. While the front end of the house was designed to limit domestic workers' presence when the Edison family wanted privacy, these (mostly) women's labor permeated every room of the house, and the household objects are all evidence of their presence, even when the archives remain silent (Figures 5–7).

This dynamic continues to shape TENHP today. A long history of resistance to permeability between Llewellyn Park and the larger community has limited the site's ability to become fully accessible to residents in the surrounding neighborhoods. I am struck by the irony that the very communities most connected to the success of Glenmont as a functioning estate—working-class families, service workers, and descendants of those who labored for the Edisons—have yet to be fully recognized in both the story of and accessibility to TENHP.

I have encountered many dead ends in this research, as often happens when tracing the lives of marginalized women. Sometimes I have only a first name or a birth surname to rely on. In the early 20th-century censuses, I noticed that the Edison family occasionally listed the names of their live-in domestic workers. To expand my search, I began examining census data for the ward in which the Edisons lived—an area that extended beyond the gates of Llewellyn Park into the surrounding, more densely settled neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, many of those nearby residents were immigrants and employees of Edison's laboratories and factories.

This realization drew my attention to the spatial dimensions of the Edison household: how the geography of West Orange—its separation of elite domestic space from the working-class valley—both reflected and reinforced broader patterns of inequality. In turn, it raised questions about how these spatial divisions persist in the present, shaping who feels entitled to access and belong within the park, and the Glenmont estate in particular.

The labor of domestic workers shaped the social progression of the Edison family: Mina could devote herself to hosting and cultivating social networks that advanced the family's status, while Edison himself was free to pursue invention. The invisible labor of the household staff made possible the visible achievements of this well-known family. What would it mean to not only tell the story of the Edison family and the laboratory complex, but also to emphasize how Edison's business shaped the economic and social lives of West Orange as an urban community, and to reflect this intersection by making the park a more permeable space?

My reflection on this question has been shaped by Erin Flynn and Andrew Barwick's article, "Serving Broader Audiences: Museums Engage Communities with Public Space" (2020). They argue that truly engaging communities requires designing for equitable access at every level, noting that "universal design goes beyond ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] regulations and helps set a new standard for inclusive cultural experiences, striving to create facilities that are usable by all people, no matter what their abilities, and without any need for adaptation."[1] Flynn and Barwick's framework of universal design offered a contemporary vocabulary for thinking through the same spatial and social barriers that have long defined the Glenmont site.

As opposed to Glenmont, the laboratory complex is permeable—during its open hours, people can simply walk in off Main Street, a busy thoroughfare of West Orange (Figure 8). By contrast, Glenmont's location inside a gated residential community demands intention, forethought, and advance planning. Visitors must navigate a five-step process—reserving a ticket in advance, checking in at the laboratory site, obtaining a grounds pass, and traveling by car into Llewellyn Park—before finally arriving at the Edisons' home.[2] While each step is manageable on its own, together they create barriers that discourage casual or spontaneous visitation.

In addition, my conversations with interpretive staff have made me aware that many visitors spend time at the laboratories but don't make it to Glenmont. Oftentimes, labs draw those inspired by Edison's inventive spirit, while the mansion tends to attract audiences interested in the Gilded Age, Victorian culture, or the popular imagery of shows like *Downton Abbey* and *The Gilded Age*. This division reflects more than visitor preference—it risks reproducing intellectual and cultural divides in the same way the site's geography reproduces class divides.

Here historian and Tenement Museum founder Ruth Abram's call for museums to provide a "usable past" becomes essential. Abram argues that historic sites must

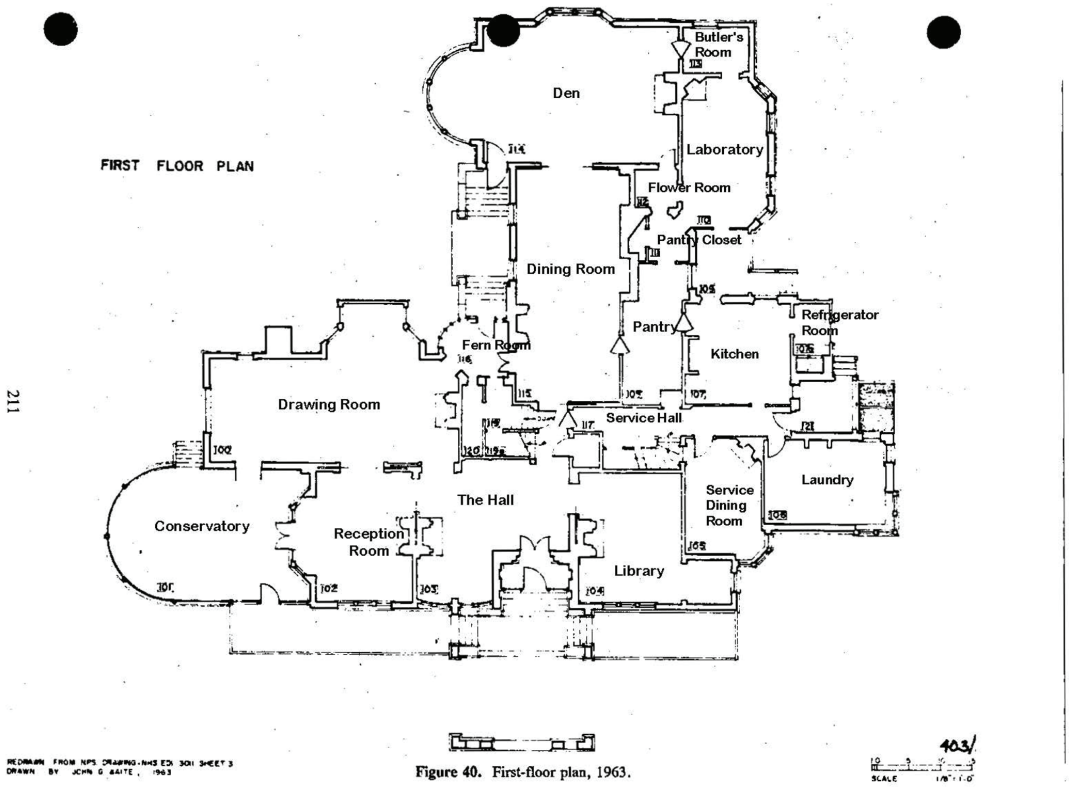

FIGURE 5. First-floor plan of Glenmont, showing the arrangement of major rooms and service areas including the butler's room, pantry, and laundry. Annotated by author. Source: Barbara A. Yocum, *Historic Structure Report: The House at Glenmont: Home of Thomas Edison, Edison National Historic Site,* Vol. I (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1998), 211, fig. 40, https://npshistory.com/publications/edis/hsr-glenmont-v1.pdf.

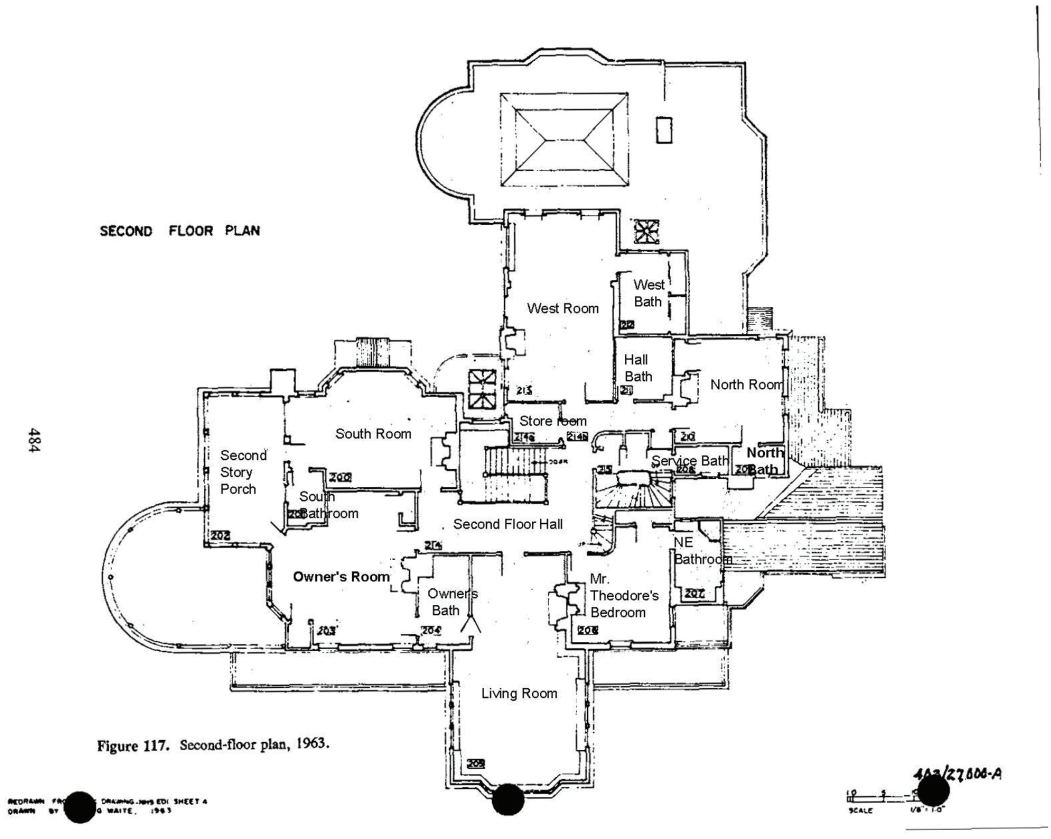

FIGURE 6. Second-floor plan of Glenmont, illustrating private family bedrooms and bath suites, including Mr. and Mrs. Edison's rooms and Theodore Edison's bedroom. Annotated by author. Source: Barbara A. Yocum, *Historic Structure Report: The House at Glenmont: Home of Thomas Edison, Edison National Historic Site,* Vol. II (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1998), 484, fig. 117, https://npshistory.com/publications/edis/hsr-glenmont-v2.pdf.

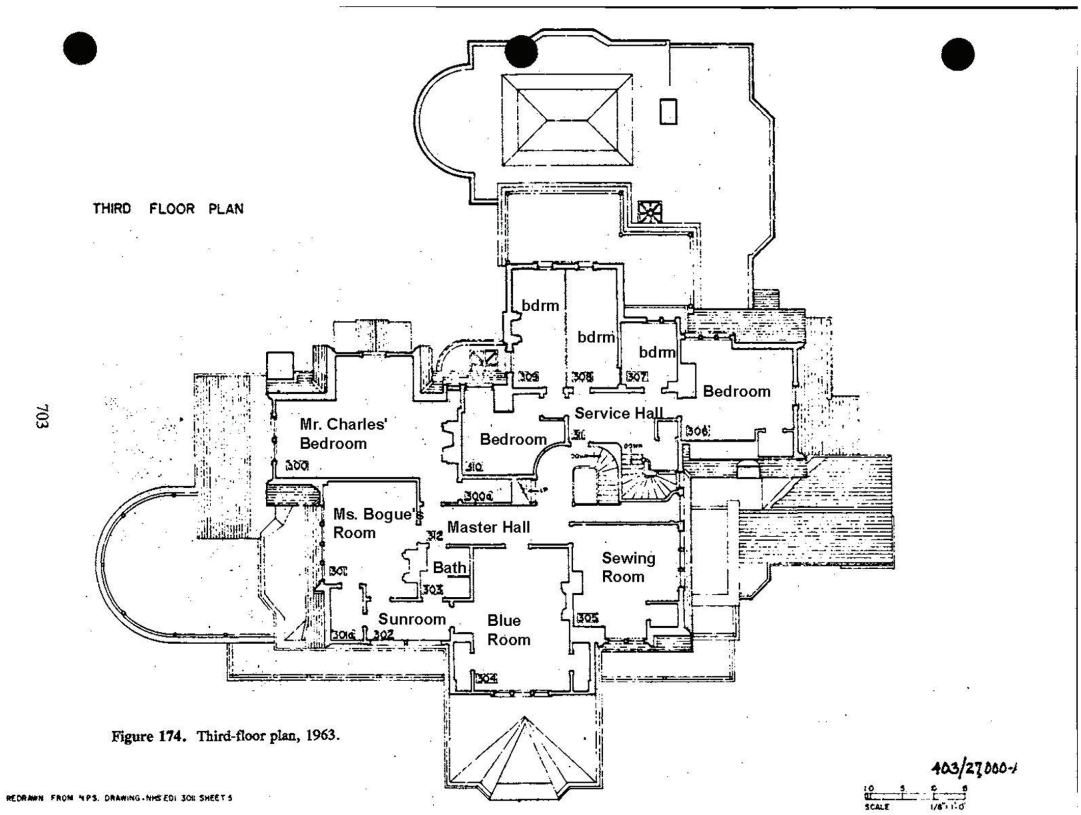

FIGURE 7. Third-floor plan of Glenmont, showing the servants' bedrooms and work areas, including the sewing room, service hall, and Ms. Bogue's room. Annotated by author. Source: Barbara A. Yocum, *Historic Structure Report: The House at Glenmont: Home of Thomas Edison, Edison National Historic Site,* Vol. II (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1998), 703, fig. 174, https://npshistory.com/publications/edis/hsr-glenmont-v2.pdf.

FIGURE 8. Front Entrance to the Laboratory Complex. There is a bus stop in front of the gate. Source: Google Maps, "Glenmont Estate, West Orange, NJ," accessed August 31, 2025, https://shorturl.at/XGXKV.

not only preserve memory but make history meaningful for contemporary communities, addressing issues of equity and belonging in the present.[3] If Glenmont's spatial structure prevents many of the very communities most connected to its domestic history—working-class families, immigrant laborers, and local residents—from accessing it, then the site risks presenting an inaccessible past as well. To align with both Flynn and Barwick's principles of universal design and Abram's insistence on usable history, Glenmont staff must rethink how access and interpretation are structured, so the mansion can serve not only as a relic of the Edisons' elite life, but also as a public resource that reflects broader stories of labor, migration, and community.

SITUATING THE GLENMONT ESTATE

The Glenmont Estate is situated in West Orange, a township in New Jersey. According to the Park's 2011 *Cultural Landscapes Inventory*, the Glenmont Estate is situated within the Llewellyn Park Historic District and covers 15.67 acres. The township covers about 12.1 square miles and, as of 2020, has a population of over 48,000.[4] West Orange lies within Essex County, the most populous county in the state. The 2020 census recorded Essex County's population at 863,728, with 27.2% identifying as White, 37.5% as Black, 5.4% as Asian, 24.4% as Hispanic, 1.6% as Native American/Other, and 3.9% as multiracial.[5] In addition, Glenmont is just a few miles west of its more ethnically diverse and less affluent neighbors–including East Orange, Irvington, and Newark (Figures 9–12).

This demographic landscape highlights the paradox of Glenmont's location: a historic site embedded in one of the most racially and economically diverse regions in the country yet situated within a gated community that restricts casual or spontaneous public access. The result is that TENHP's geography reproduces boundaries of exclusion, even as its surrounding communities embody the kinds of audiences that heritage institutions increasingly seek to serve.

A SPATIAL HISTORY OF THE LLEWELLYN PARK: SPACE, CLASS, AND THE GLENMONT ESTATE

The National Park Service's *Cultural Landscapes Inventory* reveals that Glenmont's challenges of access are rooted in the estate's spatial history.[6] In the mid-19th century, rapid industrialization created crowded, polluted cities, spurring wealthy families to seek healthier surroundings. After losing four of their five children, New York businessman Llewellyn S. Haskell and his wife relocated to the countryside, purchasing 65 acres in what became West Orange.[7] By 1857, Haskell had amassed 415 acres and, with architect Alexander Jackson Davis, established Llewellyn Park—the nation's first planned residential community.[8] Haskell and Davis adhered to American landscaper and designer Andrew Jackson Downing's ideals of the "Picturesque" and the "Beautiful," incorporating sweeping lawns, curving drives, rustic evergreens, and carefully composed views into the park's landscape.[9] The Gate House, completed in 1857, reinforced exclusivity through its single point of entry, signaling that this enclave was deliberately insulated from the surrounding urban landscape.[10]

Between 1879 and 1881, Henry Pedder, a confidential clerk (an administrative assistant who handles sensitive information) at Arnold Constable and Company, purchased about 13 acres in Llewellyn Park that would become the Glenmont Estate.[11] He hired architect Henry Hudson Holly to design a Queen Anne-style house, while landscape architect Nathan Franklin Barrett laid out the grounds.[12] Together they created a picturesque estate featuring winding drives, expansive lawns, informal tree groupings, gardens, orchards, and outbuildings, including a barn, carriage house, and greenhouse, completed in 1882.

Thomas Edison purchased the Glenmont Estate in 1886 as a gift for his fiancée Mina Miller. For the Edisons, Llewellyn Park offered not only respite from the hyper-industrialized spaces of New York and New Jersey, but also the experience of countryside living—an appealing choice for Mina and Thomas Edison, who both spent their early years in more pastoral Ohio. And, conveniently, his laboratory complex was just down the hill, a short walk down Honeysuckle Avenue (Figure 13). Shortly after purchasing their home, Edison began construction of his laboratory complex, which was just one mile away.[13] The two sites represented different worlds—an exclusive, pastoral retreat and a bustling industrial hub. Both Thomas and Mina would live at Glenmont until their deaths, in 1931 and 1947, respectively. The couple was interred at their forever home in 1963.[14] About a year before she died, Mina sold her home to her husband's company, Thomas A. Edison, Inc., with one stipulation:

"Glenmont and its contents … be preserved as a memorial to my dear husband and his work."[15]

An ongoing history of isolationism and resistance to change stymied the development of the estate into a historic site that could be made easily accessible to the public. After Mina died, Thomas A. Edison, Inc. and the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation (now known as the

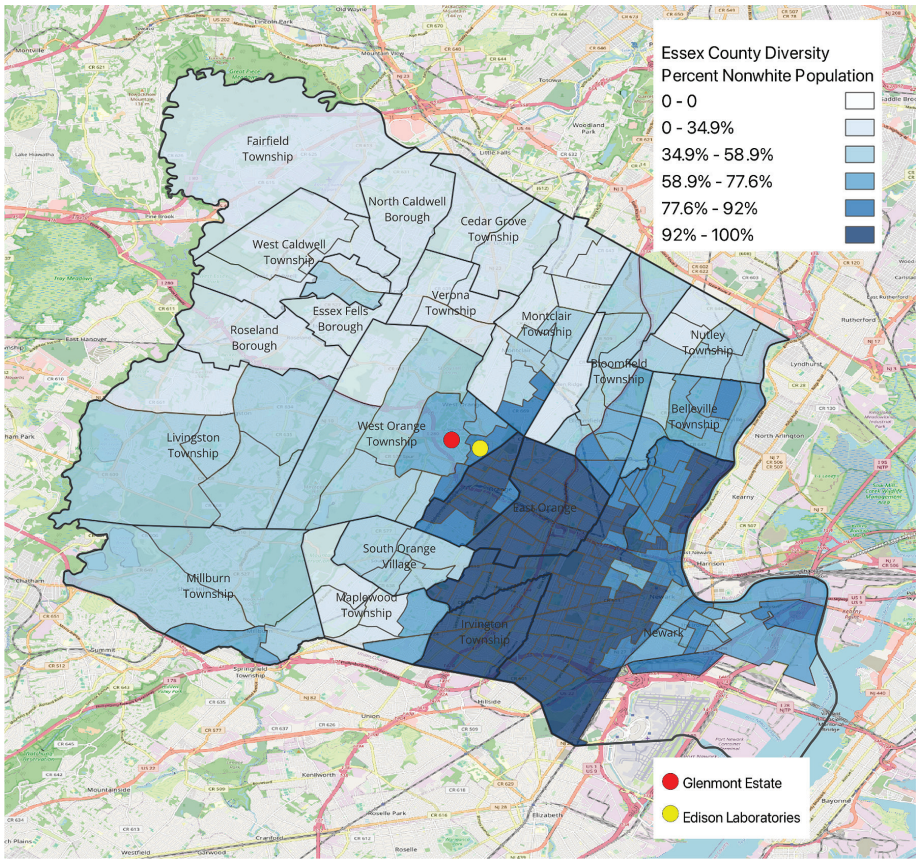

FIGURE 9. Essex County Diversity (Percent Nonwhite Population). This county-wide map illustrates racial and ethnic diversity across Essex County, New Jersey, using 2023 American Community Survey estimates of the Nonwhite population by census tract. Darker blue shades indicate greater diversity, with the densest concentrations found in Newark, Irvington, and East Orange. Glenmont Estate (red) and Edison Laboratories (yellow) are located in neighboring census tracts within West Orange Township—an area that bridges a clear socioeconomic and demographic divide. Source: US Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates,* 2023. Table B03002. Accessed October 2025. Base map © OpenStreetMap contributors. Map created in QGIS 3.36. https://data.census.gov/.

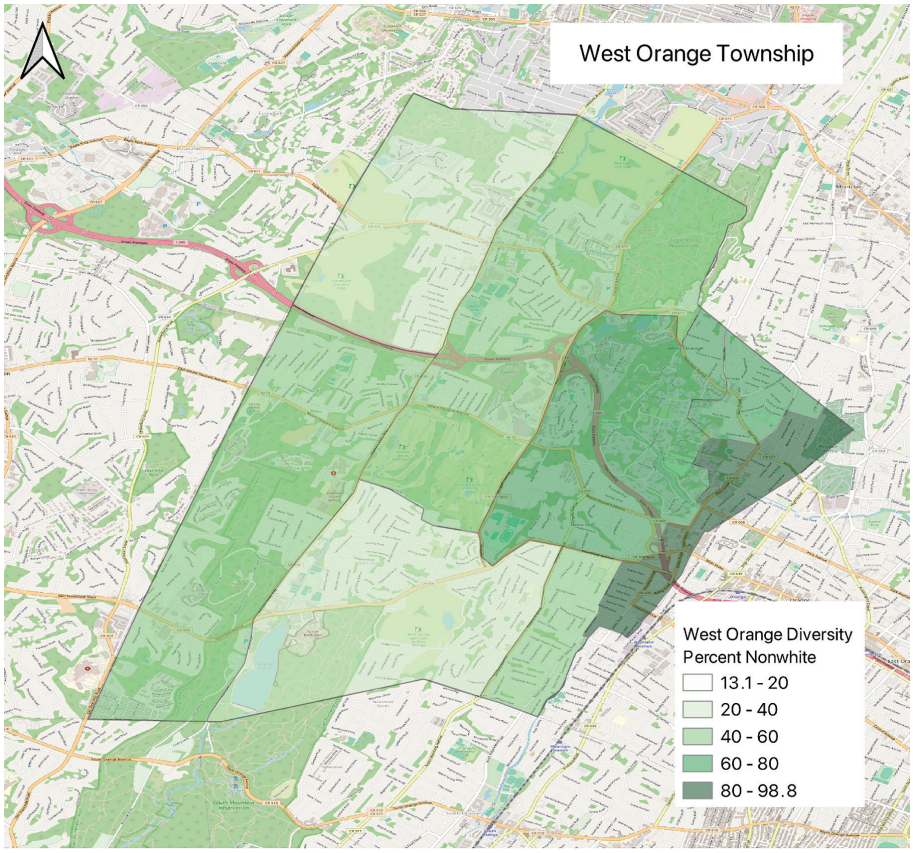

FIGURE 10. West Orange Township (Percent Nonwhite Population). This closer view of West Orange Township highlights the uneven distribution of racial and ethnic diversity within the municipality. Eastern census tracts, where Edison Laboratories are situated, have significantly higher Nonwhite populations compared to western tracts surrounding Glenmont Estate. The data reveal that despite being less than one mile apart, the two sites occupy very different demographic contexts. Source: US Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates,* 2023. Table B03002. Accessed October 2025. Base map © OpenStreetMap contributors. Map created in QGIS 3.36. https://data.census.gov/.

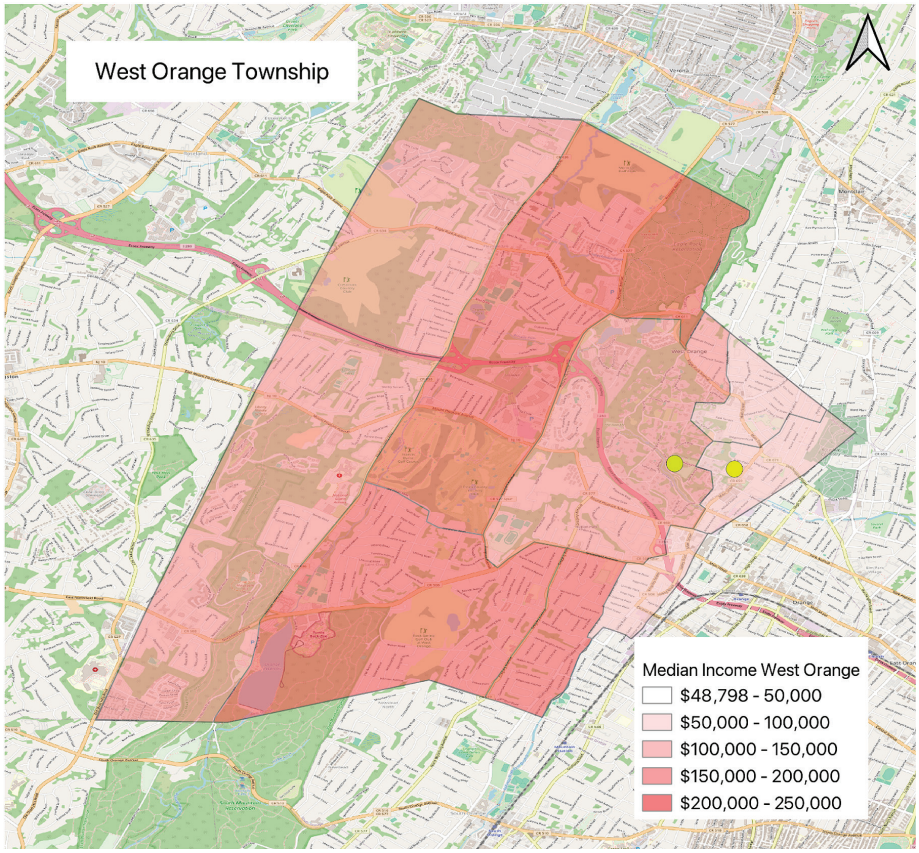

FIGURE 11. West Orange Township (Median Household Income). Median household income in West Orange varies sharply by census tract. The tracts encompassing Glenmont Estate fall within some of the township's highest income ranges, while the census tract containing Edison Laboratories shows markedly lower median income levels. This contrast underscores how economic disparity overlaps with racial and ethnic differences at a hyperlocal scale. Source: US Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates,* 2023. Table B19013, "Median Household Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2023 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars)." Accessed October 2025]. Base map © OpenStreetMap contributors. Map created in QGIS 3.36. https://data.census.gov/.

FIGURE 12. Zoomed View—Glenmont Estate and Edison Laboratories. The Glenmont Estate and Edison Laboratories are located less than one mile apart, yet they represent distinct socioeconomic and demographic zones within West Orange. Glenmont lies within a predominantly higher-income, less diverse tract, whereas the area surrounding the Edison Laboratories exhibits greater racial diversity and lower median income levels. This micro-geographic contrast mirrors broader patterns of spatial segregation in Essex County. Source: US Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates,* 2023. Table B19013, "Median Household Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2023 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars)." Accessed October 2025]. Base map © OpenStreetMap contributors. Map created in QGIS 3.36. https://data.census.gov/.

FIGURE 13. Routes between Glenmont Estate and the Edison Laboratories, ca. 1905–1920. This georeferenced Sanborn map shows two primary routes connecting Thomas Edison's Glenmont Estate (left) to the Edison Laboratory complex in the Valley (right): one descending along Honeysuckle Avenue to Valley Street, and another via Park Avenue past the gatehouse. The modern Google Maps route between the two sites measures only about two minutes by car. Park Avenue today lacks sidewalks, which underscores how Glenmont's elevated, spacious residential setting contrasted sharply with the denser, industrial landscape of the Valley below—even within a single township.

Edison Foundation) proposed that laboratories be used as a research center and that Glenmont be used as a meeting space home for the center's president—a plan which seemed aligned to Edison's legacy.[16] Part of the vision for this proposal was the construction of a private road to connect the Edison Laboratory Complex and the Glenmont Estate, an idea that would allow employees and visitors to pass between the two spaces without using Llewellyn Park roads. Meetings with Llewellyn Park residents halted the progression of this plan, and it seems like there was no clear agreement on the future of the Glenmont Estate.[17] In July 1959, the McGraw-Edison Company (formerly Thomas A. Edison, Inc.) donated the Glenmont estate to the federal government, and the National Park Service and the Trustees of Llewellyn Park formalized an agreement on the estate's management.[18] The Edison Home (designated by order of the secretary of the interior as Edison Home National Historic Site in 1955) and the Edison Laboratory (proclaimed by President Eisenhower as Edison Laboratory National Monument in 1956) were merged in 1962 under Public Law 87-628, which re-designated both as Edison National Historic Site.[19] The site remained under that title until the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-11) officially renamed it Thomas Edison National Historical Park.

A few years after the 1962 merger, in 1971, the historic site made another effort to make the Glenmont Estate more easily accessible. To address the fact that buses were not allowed in Llewellyn Park, the park proposed the construction of a footpath between the visitor center (located at the Laboratory Complex on Main Street) and Honeysuckle Road, which leads directly into Glenmont. However, the proprietors of Llewellyn Park opposed this plan (Figure 14).[20]

TENHP's aforementioned access model is a response to the limitations placed on how visitors to the park could access Glenmont. However, this model reinforces

FIGURE 14. Google Maps image of the Laboratory Complex and the Thomas Edison Home. It is a 14-minute walk or a 2-minute drive. Notice that Honeysuckle Avenue no longer connects to Main Street as it once did (as seen in Figure 13). Source: Google Maps, "Thomas Edison Home to Thomas Edison National Historic Park," accessed August 31, 2025.

exclusivity. Heritage studies practitioners insist museums must be inclusive, participatory, and community-relevant to thrive. In her book, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges,* Elizabeth Crooke, citing Zygmunt Bauman, notes that community is often constructed in response to *insecurity*, creating boundaries of belonging and exclusion.[21] In this context, a community is a self-organized heritage group emerging from the local people themselves, and defined by shared history, culture, ethnicity, locality, or interest. Edison's fame as a world-renowned inventor made him a celebrity, and with that status came real concerns for safety. Park records reveal that Peter Malloy, a houseman at Glenmont, was issued a Colt Police Positive revolver to serve as "inside watchman at the Edison residence."[22] Employee files also document that the family once received kidnapping threats against their children, underscoring the need for security.[23] It follows that the choice to live in a gated, privately governed community was not only logical but perhaps essential.

Admittedly, as a single point of entry, the gatehouse provided Llewellyn Park residents like the Edison family with a necessary measure of privacy. What the official documentation understates, however, is that Llewellyn Park was an enclave for the wealthy—its exclusivity was both protection and privilege. As Cathy Stanton's study of Lowell National Historical Park demonstrates, even when sites engage with histories of labor and class, interpretation often risks reinforcing the very social divides it seeks to expose.[24] The conundrum for interpreters today is how to balance this context with the broader reality of class-based isolation that continues to shape access to Glenmont.

Attempts to fulfill Mina Edison's wish for the house to serve as a public memorial have repeatedly been constrained by Llewellyn Park's private governance, perhaps in determination to preserve the park's original purpose as a secluded, nature-focused enclave. This pattern of resistance reveals how Llewellyn Park's design principles—conceived in the 19th century to shelter elite families from industrial blight—created a problem of class-based isolationism. In the first chapter of their book, *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States,* Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder make a

simple, pointed statement, "the setting up of boundaries is always a political act."[25] The estate's limited accessibility today is reminiscent of broader histories of class-based isolationism, neighborhood covenants, and other practices that reinforced social and racial segregation in American communities. Elizabeth Crooke, drawing on Gerard Delanty, distinguishes between "thin" communities—loosely connected by a few shared traits—and "thick" communities—rooted in deeper associations of heritage and identity.[26] Glenmont's current terms for access inhibit the formation of a thicker community—where members from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds can observe more interconnection and overlap between one another's cultures and identities. While I cannot confirm direct lineal descent, the neighborhoods surrounding the park—particularly those near Llewellyn Park and along Valley Street—remain, as they have been historically, working-class, inhabited by families whose socioeconomic circumstances reflect continuities with those of the domestic and industrial laborers who once sustained the Edison household and laboratories.

DOING THE WORK: COLLABORATION AND BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Incorporating Mina Edison's legacy into the park's mision could help embed TENHP more deeply within its surrounding community. Mina was known for her philanthropy and civic engagement, making regular donations and supporting numerous local organizations. In April 1900 alone, she gave $158 to charity, and in other months her contributions exceeded $270—equivalent to roughly $7,700 today.[27] Reflecting on her life in a 1915 interview, Mina remarked, "I have no fads. I attend my church work and try to do my duty in my home community, charities, philanthropies."[28] Her words and actions illustrate a consistent dedication to both family and community beyond the gates of Llewellyn Park.

Honoring this legacy can do more than memorialize Mina's good works; it can model a framework for community partnership and civic inclusion. By interpreting her life alongside the histories of the domestic workers who sustained Glenmont, my project seeks to broaden the park's interpretive scope—illuminating how every person who lived and labored at the estate contributed to the region's social fabric. Rooting Glenmont's story in these intertwined experiences can help the site engage audiences who may not have previously seen their own histories reflected there.

During the second year of my fellowship, my goal is to build on this foundation by emphasizing Mina's spirit of philanthropy and community service—particularly her ties to West Orange and the surrounding area. Integrating these values with narratives of labor, migration, and local industry could reposition Glenmont as not only a memorial to invention but also a space for civic reflection, where the histories of household, neighborhood, and innovation intersect. In doing so, the park can begin to address the spatial and social divides that have long shaped its accessibility and its public meaning.

With the support of American Conservation Experience, I have developed partnerships with universities in proximity to TENHP. I believe that establishing ongoing collaborations with nearby institutions can help the park remain relevant and better connected to its surrounding communities. The continued cycling of students and scholars through these spaces creates new opportunities for sustained dialogue between visitors, researchers, and interpretive staff.

This approach aligns with what Franklin Vagnone and Deborah Ryan describe as "transposition" in *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* (2016). In their chapter "Community Markings," they define transposition as the practice of moving a museum's narratives, rooms, or collections "into unexpected places" in order to reach broader audiences. Presenting my research to university students and faculty, and hosting interpretive materials on university platforms, are forms of this kind of transposition—placing Glenmont's histories within contemporary educational and digital contexts where they can generate ongoing exchange.[29] As Vagnone and Ryan argue, transposition allows historic house museums to weave themselves more deeply into their community's cultural fabric and to counter their tendency to become, in their words, "self-contained tombs"—isolated and inaccessible to surrounding audiences.[30]

I am initiating a process of collaboration that can serve as a model for how TENHP might sustain and expand its audiences through partnerships that cross institutional boundaries. This approach is grounded in the conviction that the park's longevity depends on its embeddedness within its local and regional networks. When museums collaborate with organizations that serve different audiences—universities, libraries, neighborhood groups, and civic institutions—they gain the capacity to interpret their collections through multiple perspectives and to engage communities who might not otherwise see themselves reflected in the site. Heightened local interaction can also give the park a more stable foundation as a physical place at a time

when national shifts in the structure and funding of the National Park Service threaten to constrict, rather than grow, public engagement.

Developing partnerships with the Llewellyn Park community or engaging with nearby public spaces in ways that extend the site's reach, will help counteract Glenmont's physical isolation. Likewise, collaboration with universities can generate new interpretive energy and intellectual exchange. Undergraduate students can bring fresh questions, digital skills, and creative approaches that help the park remain relevant. With the support of the American Conservation Experience, I have been able to build relationships with projects such as the Thomas A. Edison Papers, Rutgers University–New Brunswick, and institutions local to the park, such as Harry A. Sprague Library, Montclair State University, with the goal of extending Glenmont's presence beyond the gates of Llewellyn Park. Working with students to develop interpretive projects and digital resources would also embody the kind of "transposition" that Franklin Vagnone and Deborah Ryan advocate in *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*—moving the museum's narratives into "unexpected places" to reach broader audiences. Student-led exhibits could be staged in campus libraries, community centers, or local museums, creating new points of contact for audiences who might never otherwise encounter Glenmont.[31]

In this sense, students studying history, economics, or business could extend interpretation beyond Edison as an inventor to examine his role in the local economy and the shaping of West Orange and the wider region. Their insights could also help staff reimagine collections and programs in ways that resonate more deeply with community audiences. Beyond universities, other local institutions could support similar collaborations that enable the park to expand its interpretive borders in ways not currently possible. Partnerships with schools, libraries, and affinity organizations could include loaned displays or co-curated exhibits featuring objects such as Mina Edison's cookbooks—materials that connect the site to universal themes of food, home, and daily life. These efforts hold the potential to not only expand access but also infuse the site with new scholarship, creativity, and relevance.

Such collaborations allow TENHP, and perhaps other parks and museums like it, to move beyond generalized visitor categories toward bringing more variety and specificity to the visitor experience.[32] By meeting the public where they already are—in the neighborhoods surrounding the site—the park can encourage more people to take the next step of visiting Glenmont itself, while cultivating a sense of welcome that counteracts its current atmosphere of exclusivity. While the park's spatial organization poses challenges, it also presents opportunities for innovative solutions that illuminate the full social, economic, and cultural exchange and influence of both Mina and Thomas Edison and the people they employed.

ENDNOTES

1. Erin Flynn and Andrew Barwick, "Serving Broader Audiences, Museums Engage Communities with Public Space," *Alliance Blog*, American Alliance of Museums, January 27, 2020, **https://www.aam-us.org/2020/01/27/serving-broader-audiences-museums-engage-communities-with-public-space/** (accessed August 27, 2025). Universal design is the concept of creating environments and programs that are inherently accessible and usable by all people—regardless of age, ability, or circumstance—without the need for specialized adaptation. The approach, advanced by architect Ronald Mace, eliminates distinctions between "standard" and "accessible" design by integrating accessibility into all aspects of a site or facility, including circulation paths, furnishings, and programmatic elements. See National Park Service, "Accessibility and Universal Design," *Design Standards & Guidelines*, **https://www.nps.gov/dscw/ds-accessibility-universal-design.htm** (accessed October 29, 2025); and "Ronald Mace and His Impact on Universal Design," Center for Disability Rights, **https://cdrnys.org/blog/advocacy/ronald-mace-and-his-impact-on-universal-design/** (accessed October 29, 2025).
2. National Park Service, "Glenmont—Touring the Edison Mansion," **https://www.nps.gov/edis/planyourvisit/glenmont-tours.htm** (accessed August 29, 2025).
3. Ruth J. Abram, "Harnessing the Power of History," in *Museums and Their Communities*, Sheila Watson, ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 125–141.
4. National Park Service, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate* (Washington, DC: National Park Service), 20; **https://npshistory.com/publications/edis/cli-glenmont-estate.pdf** (accessed August 27, 2025); New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, *Population Change by County and Municipality: Total Population—Census 2010 to Census 2020* (Trenton: New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, n.d.), 8; **https://www.nj.gov/labor/labormarketinformation/assets/PDFs/census/2020/2020%20pl94%20Tables/2020_Mun/MCD%200_All.pdf** (accessed August 29, 2025).
5. Census Dots, "A Map of Essex County's Population by Race," **https://www.censusdots.com/race/essex-county-nj-**

demographics (accessed August 27, 2025).

6. The concept of *spatial inequality* refers to the uneven distribution of resources and opportunity across geographic space—a process shaped by state and local policies such as zoning, infrastructure investment, and housing finance. Foundational work by urban theorist Edward W. Soja helped prompt the "spatial turn" in the social sciences; see Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989). In sociology, scholars such as Linda M. Lobao and Ann R. Tickamyer have been especially influential in defining and advancing the study of spatial inequality; see Ann R. Tickamyer, "Space Matters! Spatial Inequality in Future Sociology," *Contemporary Sociology* 29:, no. 6 (2000): 805–813; and Ann R. Tickamyer, Gregory Hooks, and Linda M. Lobao, eds., *The Sociology of Spatial Inequality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012). See also Linda M. Lobao and Gregory Hooks, *Rethinking Spatial Inequality* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2025). For a public policy perspective, see Paul Jargowsky, "The Spatial Dimensions of Inequality," *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*, June 27, 2014, https://items.ssrc.org/author/paul-jargowsky/.
7. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate* 29.
8. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 27–28.
9. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 28.
10. Llewellyn Park, "History," https://www.llewellynpark.com/page/13266~93841/history (Accessed August 27, 2025).
11. Pedder lost Glenmont after it was discovered that he used embezzled funds to finance its construction.
12. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 31, 42.
13. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 27.
14. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 35.
15. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 59.
16. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 60.
17. Ibid.
18. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 62.
19. "Management," Thomas Edison National Historical Park, National Park Service, https://www.nps.gov/edis/learn/management/index.htm (last modified February 26, 2015).
20. NPS, *Cultural Landscapes Inventory: Glenmont Estate*, 36, 65.
21. Elizabeth Crooke, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2007), 32. In Crooke's work, "community" is a constructed and contested social entity—one that overlaps with the museum sector's objectives and the communities' own agenda, but is also shaped by issues of power, access, identity, and representation. These are the issues that shape access and interpretation of TENHP today.
22. "Malloy" Folder, Glenmont Employee Files, Glenmont Estate, Thomas Edison National Historical Park, West Orange, NJ.
23. "Katherine Ethel Pardoe" Folders, Glenmont Employee Files, Glenmont Estate, Thomas Edison National Historical Park, West Orange, NJ.
24. Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 182. Stanton observes that at Lowell National Historical Park the "rituals of reconnection … deny the social distances between these postindustrial workers and people less fortunately situated in the present day." She also notes (p. 192) that local working-class residents were largely peripheral in the interpretive narrative of the park. 2
25. Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 1.
26. Elizabeth Crooke, *Museums and Community*, 29–30.
27. Mina Edison vouchers, General, 1899–1900, and Mina Edison vouchers, General, 1897–1898, Series 6, Thomas Edison National Historical Park Archives, West Orange, NJ. Official Data Foundation, "$200 in 1900 → 2025 | Inflation Calculator," *Official Inflation Data*, https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1900?amount=200 (accessed August 31, 2025).
28. Mina Miller Edison quoted in *San Francisco Examiner*, October 20, 1915, 14, as cited in Alexandra Rimer, *Seduced by the Light: The Mina Miller Edison Story*, Kindle ed.; Function, 2023), 414.
29. Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015) 67–69.
30. Vagnone and Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide*, 68.
31. This comes in response to Elizabeth Beckmann's observation that internships help bridge "the boundaries between institutions of formal education and the museum profession" and create "opportunities for collaboration, especially through communities of practice." Elizabeth A. Beckmann, "Internships in Museum Studies: Learning at the Interface," in *Museums and Higher Education Working Together: Challenges and Opportunities*, Jos Boys, ed. (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 39.
32. This is in response to John H. Falk's assertion that "more customized and tightly tailored ways to meet the specific needs of individual visitors" are needed. See Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), 11.