

## CITATION:

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# THE FORGOTTEN YEARS OF BIBENDUM, THE MICHELIN MAN: A STORY TO DISCOVER

During the first decade of the 20th century, Michelin, the French company in the tire industry sector with a factory in Clermont-Ferrand and commercial offices in Paris, launched a process of internationalization. They created subsidiaries in the neurological centers of principal markets: in Great Britain—with headquarters and warehouses in London since 1905—, in Italy—with administrative and commercial headquarters in Milan and the factory in Turin operative since 1906—, and in the United States of America—with administrative headquarters and the factory located in Milltown, New Jersey, active from 1907 until 1930. The twenty-three years of production, commercial and advertising impact resulting from this initial venture in the U.S. make up a little-known period in the history of this multinational company. The reason for this lies in the corporate story construed and canonized by the company itself, where successes and achievements are highlighted and ill-fated episodes and failures are minimized or ignored. Consequently, the case of the Michelin Tire Company in Milltown barely takes up a few lines. The U.S. subsidiary closed its factory in 1930, succumbing to all efforts made to function in a fiercely competitive market.

After this first traumatic adventure, Michelin did not return to the U.S. market until many years later. First, through the Michelin Tire Corp. in New York (established March 1950), which functioned as an import agency for the Michelin tires manufactured in Europe to equip heavy vehicles. In 1976, Michelin inaugurated the first of their modern factories in South Carolina, initiating a second adventure in North American territory which this time would culminate in success.

The advertising elements launched in European territories contribute to the history of design and poster art due to their graphic value and the renown of the artists who generated them. Of these the creation of Bibendum the tire man stands out, Michelin's corporate and promotional mascot who turned 100 years old in 1998 and who continues to work incessantly as the company's ambassador. However, in contrast to what happened with Michelin's corporate history in France—for which a prolific bibliography exists—the American period remains relatively unexplored territory. Especially in terms of ignoring strategies that were developed in the field of graphic design and advertising during almost a quarter of a century of their continuous presence in the market.

The corporate history and advertising activity of the Michelin U.S. subsidiary, the Michelin Tire Company in Milltown, constitute a unique case study on the adaptation of cultural patterns used in French and European advertising practice to the panorama in the United States of America. The mascot Bibendum, omnipresent in corporate and advertising communication from French headquarters and its European subsidiaries (fig. 1), was introduced into American advertising and used for more than two decades as an advocate of its tires and as company ambassador and spokesman. What are the basic pillars characterizing advertising production that made it distinctive in terms of design compared to what was carried out in Europe? What was the role that Bibendum played as the corporate and promotional mascot in that initial venture in the USA?

With the aim of answering these questions, this investigation has focused on reconstructing the firm's U.S. corporate history and has analyzed its fit with policies launched from French headquarters through the advertising developed in various promotional campaigns and activities, and applied to different mediums and incorporated into publications, magazines and newspapers. Other research areas have centered on understanding the characteristics and utilization of mascots, the uniqueness of Michelin's Bibendum and the comparison of its advertising use on both sides of the Atlantic. As such, the investigation was carried out by considering advertisements as essential documentary sources which served as the starting point for understanding the facts they represented, giving value to their design and graphic elements applied in the process of translating concepts into effective images.

One task to highlight was the process of compiling, organizing and analyzing advertisements and elements of identity utilized by the Michelin U.S. subsidiary, as well as detecting and specifying the role and contributions of the different stakeholders—management, advertising agencies, art directors, designers, illustrators and graphic artists—who participated in their creation. In this process the criteria and tools of a design office have been applied for analyzing several facets of advertisements: the discourse expressed in their texts; their formal manifestation, compositional and stylistic aspects; and the resulting sum of both factors to create communicative artifacts that had to effectively respond to formalizing concepts and expressing messages with content. This analysis and commentary has been conducted from a graphic design perspective, based on my training as a graphic designer and from my experience of over twenty years as an art director in design studios, advertising agencies and publishing companies.

The compilation and graphic commentary of the company's material has been placed within the historical and geographical context (fig. 2) in which it occurred, taking into account the advertising activity of U.S. manufacturers in the rubber and tire industry and when necessary, including influential cases of European companies. This approach has allowed us to know the impact that historical facts, social changes, technological progress or commercial competitiveness have had over the years in the advertising strategies of the Michelin Tire Company in Milltown and its rivals in the sector.

Obtaining and consulting documentary sources on Michelin's American venture presented many drawbacks. Indeed, the harsh conditions surrounding the closure of the American subsidiary's factory in 1930—a significant trauma for Milltown's population—and the dismantling of facilities, its staff of factory workers as well as administrative, commercial and managerial employees, did not favor the preservation of existing archives. As a result, in the current historical archives of Michelin and other entities—such as the Milltown Historical Society, the institution responsible for recuperating and disseminating the history of the population where the activity of the U.S. subsidiary took place—there is little and incomplete information regarding the American venture. And it seems that no other researcher has, in my opinion, hitherto tackled the topic in the dimension that it deserves.

In principle, it was imperative to consult the archives of the French company itself, which is today fully active as one of the world leaders in the tire sector and has a department—Patrimoine Michelin based in Clermont-Ferrand, France—dedicated specifically to the preservation and dissemination of its historical heritage. However, this was not a simple task, due to the policy of confidentiality and restriction on documentary repositories imposed and carried out by the company for decades, an issue that still stands and is explicitly stated by independent researchers and authors of different books and articles dedicated to the history of Michelin. However, thanks to the efforts and initiative of Juan de San Román, former Director of Internal Communication and Historical Heritage of Michelin Spain-Portugal, I had the opportunity to travel twice to Clermont-Ferrand and visit the premises of Patrimoine Michelin. There I was allowed to review some graphic material from the Milltown era that proved to be scarce, unrelated and not referenced nor dated, but useful to complete and contrast various data. The most noteworthy finding was the unprecedented and complete series of period photographic paper copies—a score of images discovered by San Román in an unclassified folder—documenting the construction of the Milltown factory between the summer and the end of 1907, which are chronologically shown in Chapter 7: “The launch of the factory.”

The shortage or absence of properly compiled, ordered and referenced documentary data was an obstacle since the start of the investigation. However, a key factor dispelled this setback: contact with a network of private collectors interested in the advertising elements of the Michelin American period. Starting from my own activity as a collector of press announcements about tire advertisements—in which Michelin occupies a preferential place—while conducting the research I had the opportunity to interact with collectors from different countries—Spanish, American, French, Belgian, British, German, Australian and Japanese, among others. These passionate collaborators provided me with new and interesting images and information, which are of course appropriately cited in the acknowledgments and credits of the images published in the present study. Thanks to the preservation efforts of these collectors, by locating, examining, understanding and uniting items that had been separated and scattered, their contributions allowed me to reconstruct in large measure a puzzle which until then had been full of gaps.

The elements I had access to were not limited to press advertisements but rather covered an interesting spectrum of commercial and promotional content reflected in items such as: corporate stationery, legal contracts, product catalogs, commercial and tariff listings, period photographs portraying the establishments associated with the Michelin commercial network and their identification signs, point of sale displays and Bibendum volumetric figures applied to window dressing. Analysis of this material made it possible to extract varied and valuable information that helped in numerous aspects, such as correctly dating the appearance of certain products and their associated advertising and promotional campaigns, or in the comparative analysis of messages and graphic styles employed at any given time.

Other important information that was extremely useful and enriching for this investigation—the majority of which has never been compiled or published before—was provided directly and personally by descendants of certain protagonists in Michelin’s American venture and by others associated with advertising for the French company and for its United States subsidiary. In this sense, as reflected in the section dedicated to acknowledgments, I counted on the collaboration of the descendants of the Michelin Tire Company’s Vice President Jules Hauvette-Michelin; the contribution of family testimonies from descendants of French and American workers of the Milltown factory; and descendants of illustrators who took part in Michelin’s French advertising such as Marius Rossillon “O’Galop,” creator of Bibendum, Édouard Louis Cousyn, or Arthur Norman Edrop and Gluyas Williams in the case of American advertising.

This research work is structured in four large blocks. Each one of them constitutes a physically differentiated volume consisting of analogous chapters that are listed in the index, which correspond to the following thematic units:

### **VOLUME I**

The first part of the study includes an introductory chapter on the creation and use of the mascot figure as a corporate and advertising element so as to understand the mechanisms of conception and implementation of the graphic identity of Michelin and its mascot Bibendum in France at the turn of the century, a topic addressed in the following two chapters. This volume also presents the summary of conclusions resulting from the research findings, as well as common sections such as the general bibliography and image credits.

### **VOLUME II**

The second part of the study chronologically reconstructs the corporate history of the implementation and deployment of the Michelin U.S. subsidiary in Milltown, as well as the development of the distinct stages and episodes that represented a turning point in the course of its productive and commercial activity. The chapters of this block deal with topics such as the U.S. startup, the crises of 1920-1921 and 1929-1930, the influence of the First World War as well as certain factors related to technological progress and competitiveness in a very saturated market.

### **Volume III**

The third part of the study centers on evaluating concrete applications of elements of identity to publicity campaigns published in the press as well as on corporate and advertising elements deployed in the United States by the Michelin Tire Company in Milltown. An extensive chapter is devoted to compiling and organizing in chronological order the publicity produced in American press, accompanied by analysis and commentaries. To close this block, three chapters are included which address the illustrators and designers who intervened in Michelin's American campaigns and the impact each one had.

### **VOLUME IV**

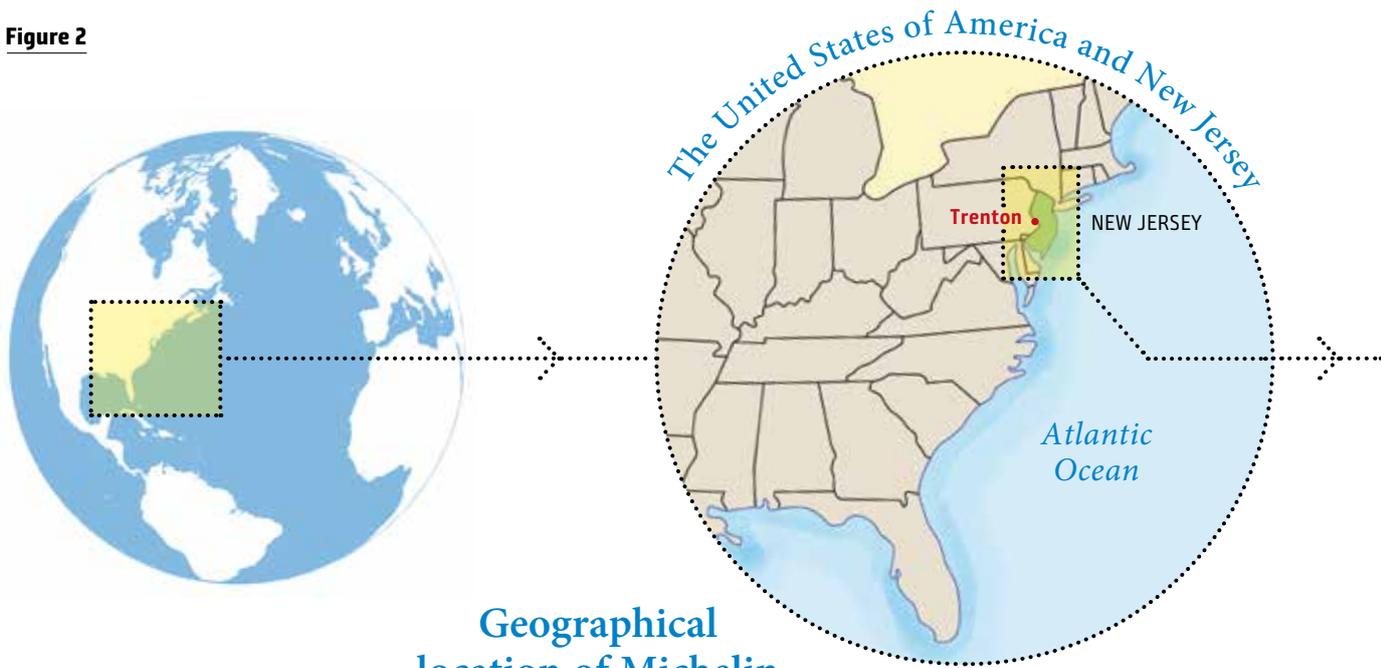
Finally, the fourth part of the study presents the corporate and advertising history of a number of leading U.S. tire companies, direct rivals of Michelin, who also employed a mascot figure in their advertisements. This was one of the blocks addressed in the early phases of research which allowed me to familiarize myself with the context as well as the publicity and commercial applications in the United States for the time period under study. I took special interest in the companies with which Michelin would have to contend in its American implementation, so as to understand the role that mascots played in all this activity.



**MULTINATIONAL SPIRIT.** Here we have publicity allegory of the Michelin production settlements in France, Italy and the United States which supplied tires to their respective countries and to the rest of the world, reaching practically the entire globe. The three Bibendums are donned with different hats, identifying the country each one represents. The Milltown Bibendum wears a Top Hat with stars and stripes on its ribbon, making reference to that used by Uncle Sam, the popular patriotic American figure.

**Figure 1.** *Mes usines.* Michelin et Cie. full-page advertisement published in the French magazine *L'illustration Théâtrale*, April 4, 1914. Illustration signed by Édouard Louis Cousyn (1881-1926) who regularly worked with Michelin publicity.

**Figure 2**

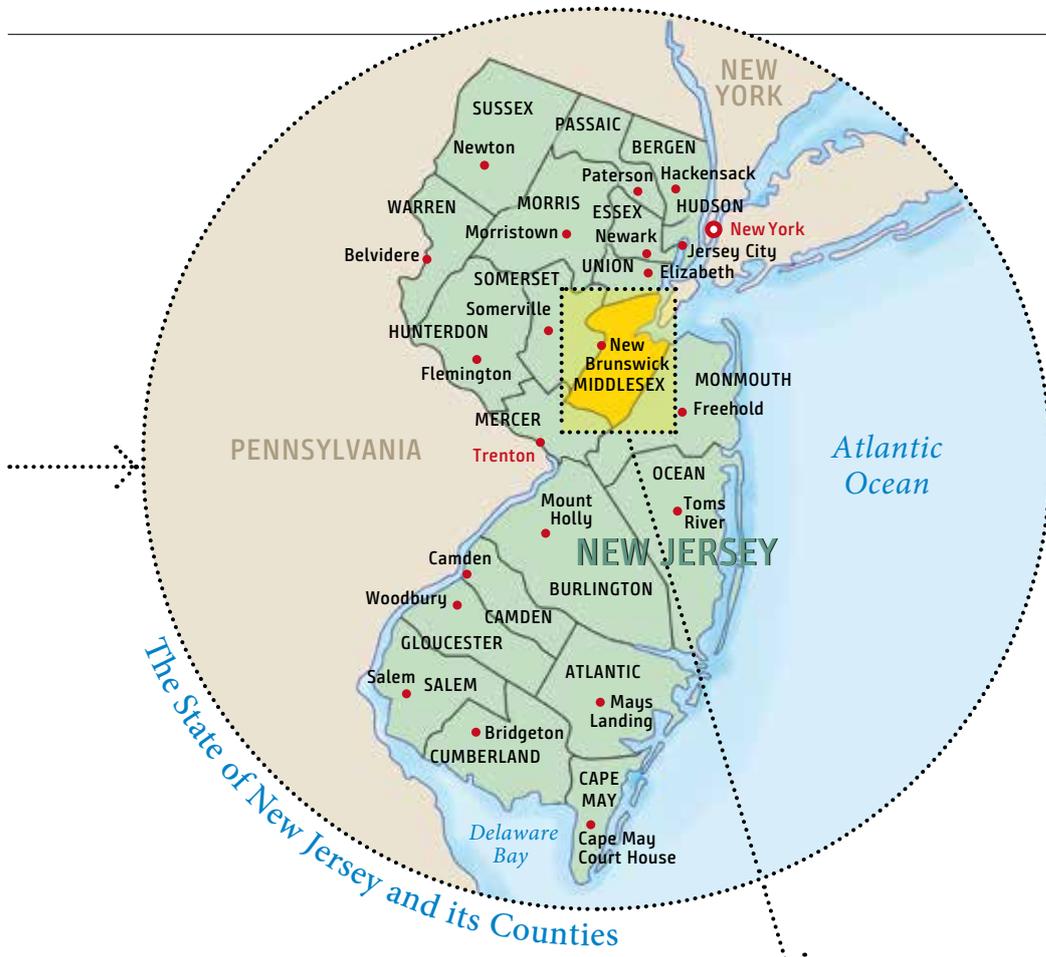


## Geographical location of Michelin Tire Company's industrial plant

In its policy of international expansion, the French headquarters Michelin et Cie proposed to install a factory to supply a promising American market. Although the heart of the American tire industry was in Akron, Ohio, it was decided to purchase a preexisting factory facility located

in the small town of Milltown, part of Middlesex County, New Jersey, on the East Coast of the United States. The Michelin property spanned 8.5 hectares and was able to house up to 15 facilities comprising warehouses and buildings, for a total of 44,130 m of constructed land.





The State of New Jersey and its Counties

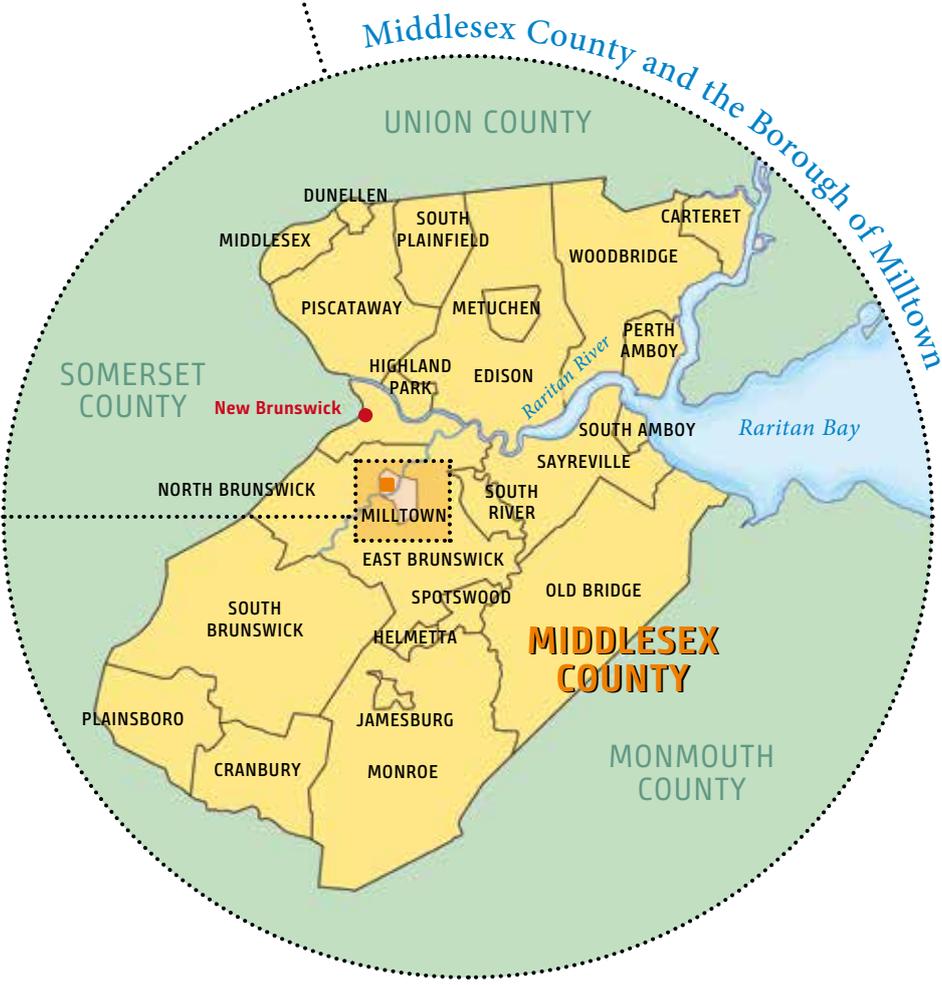
**THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY**

The State of New Jersey consists of 21 counties, including Middlesex, which houses the borough of Milltown. This population offered a privileged enclave for the aspirations of the French firm due to good road and waterway communications as well as a railway network. In addition, it was less than 31 miles from New York and its important seaport, a key business hub. On the other hand, in contrast to the industrial concentration of the tire sector in Akron, the less congested setting of Milltown allowed for maintaining a certain degree of privacy and greater control over activities.

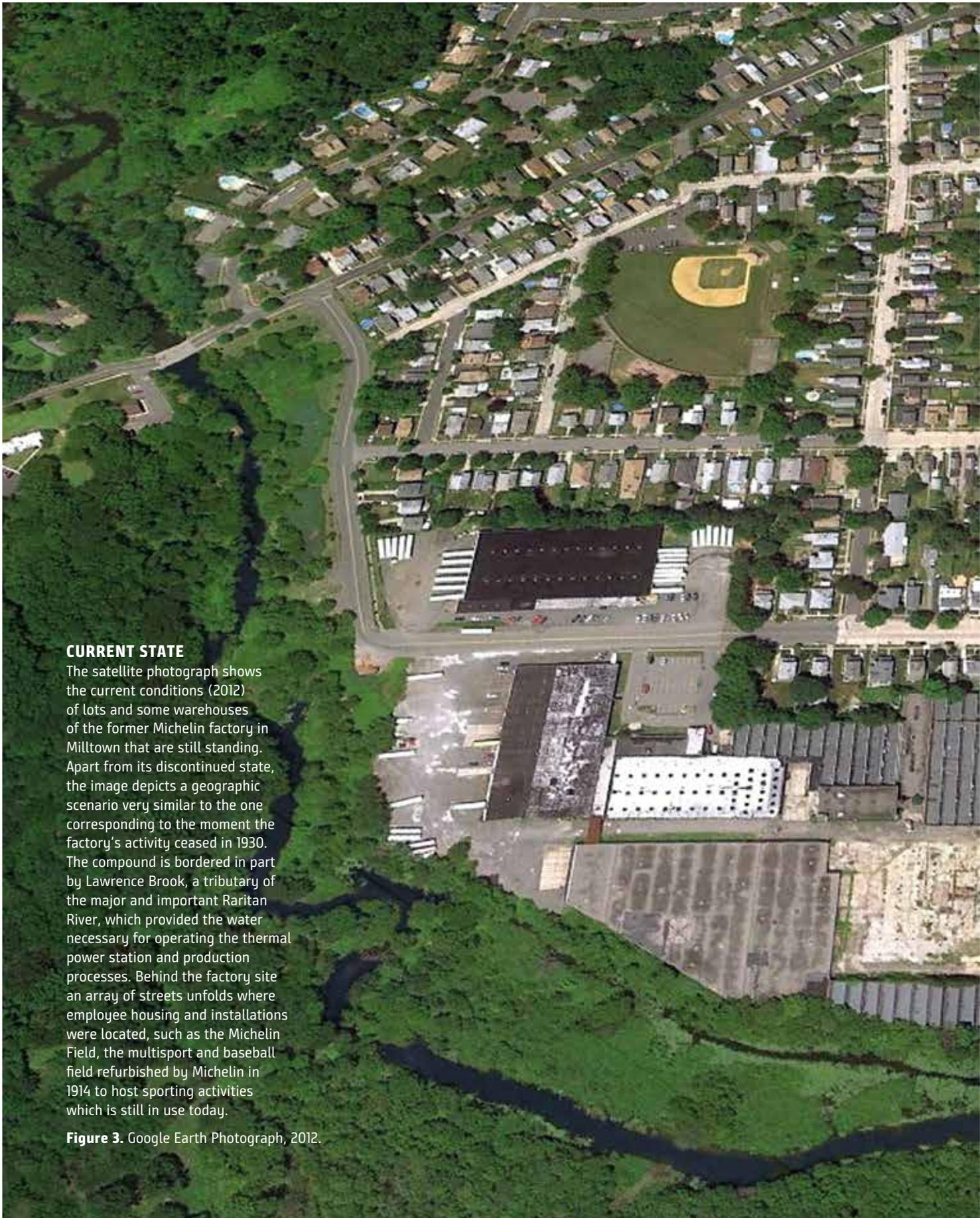
**MIDDLESEX COUNTY**

The County of Middlesex is made up of 25 distinct municipalities, some of which include settlements without their own administrative entity. The main axis of the territory is shaped by the course of the Raritan River, and both this waterway and its distinct tributaries constitute natural boundaries. One such tributary is Lawrence Brook, which runs through Milltown Borough before joining the Raritan River.

Along its course, and due to the action of several artificial dykes built during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Lawrence Brook contains several elongated reservoirs. One of them is located under the Main Street bridge—the principal road—which joins the two halves of the population, and is responsible for the accumulation of water and the generation of Mill Pond, which borders the lands formerly occupied by the Michelin factory and its facilities.



Middlesex County and the Borough of Milltown

**CURRENT STATE**

The satellite photograph shows the current conditions (2012) of lots and some warehouses of the former Michelin factory in Milltown that are still standing. Apart from its discontinued state, the image depicts a geographic scenario very similar to the one corresponding to the moment the factory's activity ceased in 1930. The compound is bordered in part by Lawrence Brook, a tributary of the major and important Raritan River, which provided the water necessary for operating the thermal power station and production processes. Behind the factory site an array of streets unfolds where employee housing and installations were located, such as the Michelin Field, the multisport and baseball field refurbished by Michelin in 1914 to host sporting activities which is still in use today.

**Figure 3.** Google Earth Photograph, 2012.

