

Brook Hills News

ONLY VOLUME

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NO CENTS

This all started when I wanted to find out the story behind the cottage on our property. I found so much great information about our area that I wanted to share it with you. I hope you enjoy reading some of what I found.

By Marge Barham

Old White Plains -

A Little Bit of History

White Plains was born on November 22, 1683, when a group of men from Rye purchased from some Westchester Indians the 4,435 acres that were to become this community.

A record of the exact amount paid for the land has yet to be found. Presumably wampum, beads, textiles, knives, and even guns, were part of the payment. It is known, however, that the signing of the deed was followed by a great feast beside the shores of a shallow lake that spread across Westchester Avenue, covering where Altman's department store today carries on business.

The names of Chiefs Orawaupum, Shapham, Nosband, and Kensico (Cockensico) are familiar to today's residents as street names. It is not surprising, however, that the names of the other chiefs, Oromahgah, Wonawaking, Kewetoahan,

Owhorawas, Patthunk, Sotonge, Hohoreis, Koawahoh, Shipatlash, Memishott, Korehvuvous, Pesekano, and Paatck never made it to the street signs. Chief Panawok, who did, lost out when his street disappeared beneath the Mamaroneck Avenue school.

The Indians called the land Quarropas which translated meant the white marshes, or plains of white. The area was so named because of the heavy fogs that for days on end wrapped the swamp lands in a misty embrace. So no more fitting name could have been chosen for the new community than the White Plains.

Settlement commenced immediately. Homes were built along the road then called simply, the Village Street. It would be more than 160 years before that street would become Broadway.

But all was not smooth going for the new settlement.

John Richbell of Mamaroneck, who had purchased

land from the Indians, claimed that his purchase extended inland for twenty miles to include the White Plains. Before this dispute could be settled, Richbell died and his claim became part of Caleb Heathcote's Manor of Scarsdale. When Heathcote died, the matter was still unresolved.

Not until March 13, 1721, was a royal patent for White Plains finally granted by King George II.

The status of White Plains improved in 1758 when the seat of the colonial government for the county of Westchester was moved from West Chester (now Westchester Square in the Bronx) to White Plains. This change was accomplished through the efforts of a White Plainsman, Dr. Robert Graham. Dr. Graham, a physician, merchant and local landowner, donated the land on Broadway and, that same year, a courthouse was erected on the site of today's Armory.

The village remained part of the Town of Rye until 1788, when the Town of White Plains was created.

The most momentous events in the history of White Plains took place in 1776.

On July 9 a dust-covered messenger dismounted in front of the White Plains courthouse on Broadway, wearily climbed the steps and entered the building where the New York Provincial Congress was sitting. He delivered to that body a copy of the Declaration of Independence that had been approved but a few days before by the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. The local Congress appointed a committee to study the document, received the committee's report, and then drew up and adopted a Resolution approving the Declaration - all in the same day!

This Resolution, supporting the Declaration which transformed a colony into a nation and changed a province into a state, enhanced the historical significance of our city. With this document White Plains became the birthplace of the STATE of New York.

Two days later, on July 11th, a dramatic beating of drums brought the villagers hurrying to the courthouse to listen as Judge John Thomas of Purchase solemnly read the stirring words of the Declaration. It was the first time these words had ever been heard by the people of the State of New York.

The following month, after the August 27 battle on

Long Island, General George Washington led his stricken army northward across Manhattan into Westchester pursued by General Sir William Howe and his British army. In White Plains Washington found the defensive positions he had been seeking.

On the sunny morning of October 28, 1776, the Americans lined the trenches they had dug across the hills of White Plains. Separated from the enemy by the impassable swamp lands of the downtown area, the men on the hills watched the British march into the plains beyond.

However, when Howe standing on Fisher Hill, looked up at the golden crowned heights of Chatterton Hill, he saw nothing but rebels on its crest. Unaware that this was the weakest section of Washington's lines - only 1,600 Americans were stationed on the hill - the British General dispatched 6,000 British and Hessians under orders to seize the hill.

It took three attacks and many casualties before the British forces overwhelmed the defenders. The outnumbered Americans then left the battlefield, streamed down Dobbs Ferry Road (Battle Avenue) to the protection of General Israel Putnam, who herded the weary men along the banks of the Bronx River to Purdy Hill where the Commander-in-Chief waited.

The price paid for this battle was five hundred American and British casualties - dead, wounded or missing. The attacking British suffered the greatest loss. The death of five

officers and the wounding of a dozen others were bitter blows to Howe.

On the Northeast corner of William Street, The Westchester Title and Trust Company building was completed in 1910 and still stands.

In the 1930's and until the 60's, the building was owned by Joseph P. Kennedy, who stopped by frequently to collect rents, accompanied by two of his sons, Bobby and John F. In the 1930's the Kennedys lived in Bronxville. John F. became the 35th President of the United States

Three days after the battle, when Washington withdrew to his North Castle defenses, British troops were moved up to the lines on Broadway.

Skirmish after skirmish followed in and around White Plains during the ensuing days, but no further ground was gained by the enemy. Finally, on November 5, the frustrated British General took his army to Dobbs Ferry, leaving White Plains to the Americans.

That night, after the British had pulled out, Major John Austin of Massachusetts, having boisterously celebrated the enemy's withdrawal, marched his men into the abandoned village. Contrary to orders issued by

Washington but a few days before, Austin set fire to and destroyed most of White Plains. Women, children and old folk were evicted from their homes into the cold of that November night. Though Austin was court-martialed and convicted for this terrible deed, he escaped punishment.

The origin of the flag that appeared on the battlefield on Chatterton Hill has yet to be found. The flag was first seen in battle on Long Island, and described in his diary by a Hessian officer. The Liberty or Death motto on the original red flag bore a reversed "a" in the word Death with the crossed sword and liberty-capped staff underneath. When White Plains became a city in 1916, the White Plains battle flag was chosen as the city's official emblem.

Recovery of the village after the war was slow. During the first part of the 19th Century, it not a sleepy hollow, White Plains was certainly a humdrum plain. There was an infusion of excitement each time a murder case was tried in the old courthouse, and especially on the days convicted criminals were hanged. Then the good citizens of Westchester came pouring into the village accompanied by families and friends to create a holiday atmosphere in the old county seat.

The majority of the heads of families who had been children during the seven years of war in Westchester could write their names with difficulty, or make only their marks. Their children seldom completed grammar

school since they were needed to help work the family farms.

The Reverend R. W. Harris, who lived in White Plains in 1830, in later years reminisced about those early days. "White Plains was a dreary place," he wrote, "insignificant in size, entirely destitute of shade trees. A deep gully, whose sides were either bare or covered with rank weeds, extended south from Lake Street along Broadway."

"This street (Broadway) was a common ground for animals and poultry which were turned loose upon it to the annoyance of those who desired to have clean paths."

The Blizzard of 1988

Sunday, March 11, 1988 dawned gray, cold and blustery. By the end of the storm on North Broadway a U.S. Signal Corps officer reported the snow fall measured 32 inches.

There were only twenty-five houses in the entire village. Fifteen on the west side of Broadway and ten on the east. "Most of the houses were small and of mean appearance," continued Reverend Harris. There were few substantial houses, an exception "being that of Minott Mitchell, Esq."

Three stores kept an "inferior assortment" of goods. There were two saddler shops, two shoe shops, and a printing office

where a newspaper, the Westchester Spy, was published. The school was "a small, ill-looking building, with not a tree nor a bush near it," according to Reverend Harris.

The United States census for 1790 lists White Plains as having a population of 505, of whom forty-six were slaves. New York City at that time had a population of 33,131.

From a 1824 Gazetteer of New York State comes an interesting description of the White Plains of that year.

"The street is pleasantly situated on a fine plain three quarters of a mile east of the Bronx Creek." The village "contains two churches, court house, and a small collection of houses. The population is 675 according to the census of 1820; 113 farmers, 47 mechanics, 8 traders, 63 free blacks, 8 slaves and taxable property of \$237,688. There are 5,300 acres of improved land, 653 cattle, 150 horses, 426 sheep, three saw mills, one oil mill (flax seed), three fulling mills and one carding mill."

With the coming of the railroad in 1844, White Plains commenced to grow. It became a village on April 3, 1866, governed by a Board of Trustees of which Professor Swinburne was chosen first president. By 1870, the year the Professor left the office, White Plains could boast of 2,630 residents.

About 1912, there was an attempt to change the name of Railroad Avenue to Graham Avenue in honor of the man instrumental in having White

Plains chosen as the county seat of Westchester. But the name Main Street won out instead. That name change was finalized in 1916 when White Plains became a city.

Roses and Skunks

Wedged between Ridgeway and the Harrison-Scarsdale borders, Rosedale is White Plains' southern outpost. Here, large estates are bowing to the developers who now sow the old farmlands with modern homes, town houses, and clustered housing.

Though Rosedale is said to have earned its name from the profusion of wild roses that once covered the area, it is sometimes called by a time-honored nickname, Skunk Hollow. That aromatic black and white creature, devoid of fear, still seeks grubs in Rosedale's manicured lawns. Let the daring canine (or human) who might challenge him beware!

Perhaps because of the many people who now call the area their home the racoon population has also increased. Or does it only seem that way because of that rascally ring-tailed robber, always flouting his black mask and getting into trouble invites attention?

In the beginning red men lived in a village beside the

Rosedale Falls, on the east side of the Hutchinson River Parkway. Here each autumn as the harvest moon rose silvery and full, the Indians anticipated the moment that the Great Spirit would show himself in the form of a beautiful white deer. When the luminous moon hung low on the eastern horizon, Indians from miles around gathered, hoping to witness the miracle. A year of good hunting was assured for the Indian who caught a glimpse of this elusive deer.

There came a time when the white deer no longer came to the falls. The Indians feared that the nonappearance of their Great Spirit forecast evil. They wondered if the coming of the huge winged bird that had carried strange white men up the great river had been a prophecy. It has not been long before those same white men were on the land, cutting the trees, building houses and killing game.

Times became difficult for the Rosedale Indians. They gathered up their possessions and journeyed northward to seek a better living. The white men took over the abandoned village site and built a grist mill by the sacred falls.

No trace of the red man remains today except an occasional arrowhead dug up in a modern garden. Still, one wonders if, since those simpler days, someone might have hesitated by the falls long enough to marvel at a harvest moon's shimmering trail across the water and to fantasize a deer outlined in misty silver.

In 1721, the Royal Patent established the settlers title to

White Plains. Eighteen owners were listed as patentees, among them was Jonathan Purdy, whose land was in the present Rosedale. Purdy's land ran west from Mamaroneck Avenue to the Scarsdale border, contained 93 acres, and included Branch Brook.

At the meeting of the freeholders in White Plains in 1733, and again in 1734, Jonathan Purdy was chosen the overseer of roads. In 1733, he was elected a fence viewer. Three years later Purdy became supervisor of the town of White Plains and was reelected in 1739.

Purdy set aside one acre of the land fronting Mamaroneck Avenue, approximately opposite today's Carrigan Avenue, as a family cemetery. Until recently a red sandstone headstone stood as a remembrance of Jinnet Ann, daughter of Israel and Nancy Purdy, who died on September 6th, 1810, at the age of nine years and one month. Hardly a stone can be found today, though 66 stones were standing in 1907. Budd Purdy (1765-1836), a grandson of Johnathan, left \$3,000 for the upkeep of the cemetery in 1836, a sizeable sum for those times.

Originally, West Street was the road to Mamaroneck, but the laying out of Mamaroneck Avenue in 1870s changed its status. From the juncture with Old Mamaroneck Road in the village, Mamaroneck Avenue continued south to West Street in Rosedale where the latter street today commences. Mamaroneck Avenue then veers, taking a different direction saved many

lovely old houses lining West Street in White Plains and Harrison from destruction.

Since the 1985-86 widening of the Hutchinson River Parkway destroyed the West Street bridge into Harrison, that street has become an abbreviated locally traveled road.

Along with the fruit of the orchards, a major crop grown on the Rosedale farm lands was cucumbers. Farmers sold their cucumbers to a small factory on the east bank of Branch Brook on Saxon Woods Road just before the Scarsdale crossing. Here they were transformed into pickles. The convenience of the factory at this site saved the Rosedale farmers a several-mile trip to the large pickle factory on Central Avenue in the village.

Also on Saxon Woods Road, a cider mill was operated by the Meyer family for many years, and it is certain that farmers loaded up with barrels of cider there each fall. When the cider froze, the remaining liquid was carefully transferred into jugs. This was apple jack, the farmers other favorite drink. Doubt it not, one glass of apple jack delivered a powerful wallop.

The Meyer family ran a general store at the Rosedale four corners, and until the 1940s Joseph Meyer tended his cows and chickens. Scorning modern conveniences, he plowed his fields with a team of oxen.

William Sammis, proprietor of the Fifth Avenue Stagecoach Company of New York City, lived in an old farmhouse on Mamaroneck

Avenue opposite Hillair Circle. Here, between duty tours, his stage horses were treated to R and R on the family's broad acres.

The Methodist Chapel was built on West Street in 1844. In the 1890s it became a public

An earthquake of 1874

On the third of December 1874, an earthquake rocked Westchester. The shock, which seemed to have most affected Mount Vernon, White Plains, Kensico, Mount Kisco and Katonah, occurred at twenty-five past 10 o'clock in the evening. Buildings shook. Plaster walls cracked, windows were broken, and objects went tumbling to the ground. No one was hurt in the quake, but there was great consternation among the citizens of the village.

Estimates of the length of the shocks ranged from ten seconds to one minute.

school and continued in that role until the new Ridgeway School opened in 1953. For a while the Cerebral Palsy Association used the building. Though the building has since been converted into a residence, the exterior of the former little red school house remains unchanged.

Mrs. Henry Schultz, who lived on nearby Rosedale Avenue, remembered hurrying to the school early each morning to build a fire in the potbellied stove, the only source of heat for the one room building. One teacher taught all grades, sometime with 36 pupils in attendance. Children from the Collyer, Carpenter,

Purdy, Bailey, Johnson, Starkey, Shaw, Siegel and Kappus families attended school here.

The Windward School, a private institution on nearby Windward Avenue has been in existence for more than 60 years, though it did not originate on this site.

On the corner of Collyer Place is the old Collyer residence, said to have once served as a grocery store. Before that it was the Rosedale Cottage of David Haviland. William Collyer, for many years a commissioner of public works for White Plains, was born here.

The 1800 census lists Israel Harriot and his wife, both over 45 years old, with a son aged between 10 and 16, two daughters whose ages were not listed, and one slave. The Harriot's family cemetery occupied the northeast corner on West Street and Windward Avenue. There is but one stone still standing, lost between the trees and underbrush, but the legend is still legible: "In memory of Abraham Leonard who died November 13, 1828, aged 33 years, six months and eighteen days." Two years before he died, Leonard purchased the property. The cemetery was part of Elias Mosher property in 1914.

Around the corner on Purdy Avenue there is an ancient house once used as a stable. This was an original Purdy house, occupied by Thomas Purdy in 1881. It has been said that it once housed a black family employed by Purdy. The remaining two buildings on Purdy Avenue were once Purdy barns, now converted into homes.

At the beginning of his 45-year rectorship at Grace Episcopal Church (1870-1915) Dr. Frederick Van Kleeck established a mission here in Rosedale. In 1910 Saint Paul's Chapel was built on Mamaroneck Avenue on the property of Charles Purdy who lived nearby. That small stone building today houses a chiropractic center.

Maps From the Past

Although our property has not been specifically mentioned in the above history, I was able to find a few maps including Rosedale Avenue.

On a genealogical sketch map of early White Plains it looks as though Samuel Merritt was the property owner in 1727.

Then an actual survey by J. Jenkins dated 1858 names Daniel H. Miller as property owner of 42 acres. On that survey three buildings were indicated. Most likely they are the main house, the barn and the cottage. In a 1907 atlas Daniel H. Miller was again named.

A 1910 atlas and also the 1914 Bromley Atlas names the next owner as A.M. Greer calling the land Ingleside Farm. I was not able to find what kind of farm it was, but around the corner in 1903 James Gibson kept records of his farm at 880 North Street. In the

record's cows and pigs are mentioned. Also they had an apple orchard with Russet and Baldwin apples, a few pear trees and grape vines and lots of strawberry plants. As mentioned in the above history, cucumbers may also have been their major crops.

The final map is a Westchester County Map with a copyright from 1930 naming Gertrude Mosbacher on the same property.

Hanging in our Club House is a copy of that same map.

The Cottage

This small one story, stone building that is located east of the garage and immediately uphill from the storm water detention pond. The building is approximately 30 x 40 feet and contains one room which is outfitted with a toilet, kitchenette and large stone fireplace. The plumbing and electricity are not connected. But still it remains in very good condition with wonderful brass chandeliers hanging from the beamed ceiling.

The son of Gertrude Mosbacher, Emil "Bus" Mosbacher, Jr., was chief of protocol during the Nixon administration. Emil Mosbacher successfully defended the America's Cup against Australian challengers when he skippered the Intrepid in 1962 and again in 1967.

Emil knew George Gershwin well. The composer used to visit him at his Westchester estate to escape the summer heat, where George, would compose in his "teahouse" seven hours each day. It was then that George began working on an early version of the song "Summertime" from "Porgy and Bess". In a letter he wrote to Dorothy Heyward he mentioned that he was going to the Mosbachers', to get some work done on Act III, Scene 2. Kay Swift would frequently visit to lend a couple of hands. Mosbacher has said, "she used to work day and night to help George with his orchestrations". George Gershwin was just 36 years old when he completed the musical "Porgy and Bess" in September of 1935.

One more bit of history, French President George Pompidou visited with Emil Mosbacher at his home on Rosedale Avenue in 1970.

Hardly The End.

The books referenced are "Yesterday in White Plains" and "It Happened in Old White Plains" both by Renoda Hoffman. Renoda Hoffman was the City of White Plains Historian for many years. Also referenced were "Gershwin-A Biography" by Edward Jablonski and "The Memory of All That - The Life of George Gershwin" by Joan Peyser.
