



Online Extra

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[<< Back to Feature Page](#)

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By David Rakoff

With its rolling lawns and elegant buildings, the campus of the Greenwich Academy is as imposing and beautiful as many full-blown universities. Founded in 1827, Connecticut's oldest school for girls, teaching preschool through grade 12, is a dream of academic girlhood. Even the lacrosse field seems an expanse of perfect, implausible green.

It is an implausible green, as it turns out. The grass is artificial, an indestructible carpet woven atop a bed of synthetic mulch. Reaching down, my fingertips bring up a fine trace of the "soil," a particulate mix of black rubber crumbs. A student walks along, singing a refrain of a song in French. Her lovely voice carries out over the field to a group of stretching athletes. I jump a few times on the ersatz turf and feel a springing weightlessness.

Perhaps this buoyancy is nothing more than the boundless sense of possibility brought on by the affluence that permeates this town. A scant hour from Manhattan by train, Greenwich, Connecticut, is synonymous with wealth in America. A particular kind of wealth; specifically, Old Money—in some sense older than the nation itself. When Paul Revere rode through in 1774 (a year before his famous ride), Greenwich was already 134 years old. Were he making the trip today, he would surely have traded in his nag at the Bentley or Porsche dealerships in town.

Along Greenwich Avenue, the main commercial strip, the sense of long-standing privilege glows as if frozen in amber. The street is redolent of an idealized past (Gap and Banana Republic notwithstanding). Uniformed officers call out "Cross!" when it is safe to do so. The 75-year-old Subway Barber still sports its sign of art deco steel letters; in the front window, chairs in the shape of tiny red convertible roadsters seat its youngest customers.

For purest nostalgia, however, nothing compares to Best & Co., a children's apparel store full of antique toy cars, rocking horses, girls' wide-brimmed straw hats, and boys' seersucker jackets in impossibly small sizes. The original store, established in New York City in 1879, gave up the ghost in 1971. The Greenwich incarnation is all of six years old—not that one would know it. It's a High WASP movie set, a brilliant simulacrum of burnished wood, miniature sofas, and glass display cases imported from New York (as are many of the town's residents). Ironically, Best & Co.'s owner and chief designer is Susie Hilfiger, whose ex-husband, Tommy, has made a fortune outfitting hip-hop kids, the spiritual opposite of this starched primness.

Concern with appearance, contrived or not, fits with the town's reputation as exclusionary. It's an image that wearies and chagrins some residents. One woman asks if I'm going to write "the usual slam," while another leaves a message, hoping I won't be too "sarcastic." People feel duty bound to drive me through Chickahominy, one of the town's working-class neighborhoods. They point out the renovation of a charming old redbrick building for the Boys & Girls Club for underprivileged youth—a project entirely funded by private donations.

"There is ego here, but almost no arrogance," says Diane Terry, a 15-year resident and mother of three who runs an adventure-travel business. Her nuanced distinction is worth understanding. One needs at least a modicum of ego to make upwards of a million dollars a year—which many residents

do—while arrogance would be woefully out of place in a town where there is always someone with a good deal more, and a good deal older, money.

That Old Money dominance has shifted, however. Dozens of investment firms have been established in Greenwich, making it a hedge fund capital rivaling Manhattan. More people commute into town than out of it, and only 28 percent of today's residents were even born in Connecticut.

Parsing the Old Money–New Money distinction is ultimately futile. Yet more than one person makes a concerted effort to apologize for the arriviste "McMansions" springing up everywhere. The rap on these newer houses is that they are too opulent, striving vulgarly for Old World legitimacy. But to an outsider they seem indistinguishable from the more established manses. A gray-shingled colossus on the water built with telecommunications money seems no larger and no gaudier than, say, the century-old blinding white replica of the Petit Trianon palace of Versailles.

It's an interesting concept: astronomical wealth as great social leveler. It might explain the marked lack of competition among the 25 debutantes and their parents at the annual Greenwich Cotillion, a fund-raiser for the Junior League. All is a happy buzz as the girls mill about in their long white dresses with bouquets of pink peonies. They wear surprisingly utilitarian hairstyles—lots of sensible comb-outs or plain barrettes. "Most cotillions in America are society driven, with girls included only by invitation or lineage," says Junior League president Laura Geffs (a "post-deb" from South Carolina). "We don't turn anyone away." Indeed, every senior high school girl is invited. Each participating debutante is required to do community service (and each family is required to pony up \$5,000 for a table for ten).

There are military campaigns less carefully planned and executed than the Greenwich Cotillion. At 7:47 the debutantes line up. At 7:55 their fathers enter, peeling off one by one to the strains of "When the Saints Go Marching In." At 8:05 the young ladies and their escorts advance to "Thank Heaven for Little Girls." It's amusing, this use of beloved standards as subtextual commentary. But what can it mean when the music shifts to the beautiful albeit ill-advised choice of the Gershwins' song for the lovelorn, "But Not for Me"?

At 9:08 the debutantes waltz haltingly with their fathers. The couples bump up against one another sweetly, like apples in a bathtub. The evening's light drizzle has graduated to full-on torrential. It sounds like applause against the walls of the enormous tent.

In 1640, when Greenwich was founded, the settlers had little idea of the nation whose birth was more than a century away, or of how Greenwich itself would become a shining symbol of that new republic's most bountiful promise. Even now, the place appears as an almost unattainable dream.

[Top](#)

[e-mail >>](#) [this page to a friend](#)