

HISTORIC PUTNAM PARK

By Jane Andlinger

A long stone wall, a spreading copper beech tree and a brick cottage all have one thing in common: they are tangible reminders of the history of Putnam Park Apartments, Inc.

Looking back more than a century, the land where our apartments are located was part of “Linwood,” the estate of William “Boss” Tweed, head of the infamous Tweed Ring that embezzled millions from New York City. In 1865, for the sum of \$18,000, Tweed purchased 40 acres of farmland and a modest house on Love Lane across from the Second Congregational Church. He expanded the house and added 18 acres and a barn for his horses. In 1870 he built a wall to form the western boundary of the property. At the time, Tweed’s group held power in New York City. They had fired the officials and architects working on Central Park and installed their own choices. Some sidewalk superintendents, observing Tweed’s wall in Greenwich, saw similarities with the walls in Central Park. It may be apocryphal, but the story persists that the wall along Milbank Avenue was a gift from the taxpayers of New York City—given without their knowledge.

Not long after this, Tweed and his group were exposed and the Tweed reign ended. In 1873, Tweed was indicted and convicted; he died in jail in 1878 at the age of 55. Despite his unsavory record, he enjoyed local recognition as something of a philanthropist. He had created the paid fire department in New York City and improved the waterfront. He started a steamer service between Greenwich and New York, and brought the first telegraph line to town, though probably for his own use.

After Tweed's death, his widow sold the estate for \$47,500 to Jeremiah Milbank, whose wife was Elizabeth Lake, a Greenwich native. Milbank, who had been a wholesale grocer, became the financial backer for Gail Borden's plan to market canned milk, made a fortune on a contract to supply milk to the government during the Civil War, and then turned to investment banking. The Tweed Estate was destined to become the "Milbank Estate" but Mr. Milbank died before the 36-room house could be completed. It was left to his wife to complete the plans, adding manicured gardens and notable trees. Two years after Milbank's death in 1884, his widow donated the clock for the steeple of the Second Congregational Church in his memory, and the road beside the property, Love Lane, was renamed Milbank Avenue.

During the next 70 years, members of the Milbank family lived on the estate, enlarging the acreage and adding several buildings, including various residences, a playhouse, a dairyman's cottage, a barn, an ice house, a root house, even a pig house. The structures have all disappeared, except for the gatehouse and a brick gardener's house that was originally attached to a large greenhouse. The gardener's house still stands between Putnam Park and Putnam Hill and is used as a superintendent's house.

By the time Elizabeth Milbank, Jeremiah's granddaughter, married Henry Adams Ashforth, the property totaled more than 300 acres, extending east from Milbank Avenue to Indian Field Road, and from the Post Road south towards the water. Gradually, pieces of the land were sold off for development: first, for Milbrook, then the Julian Curtiss School, Putnam Park, Putnam Hill, Anderson Ridge, and finally, One Milbank.

According to minutes of the Town Plan Commission, there was discussion of a Milbank Avenue apartment plan as early as 1941. The following year a public hearing was held to consider a proposed amendment to the zoning map that would change the land now part of Putnam Park from a single-residence zone to an apartment zone. The amendment was approved, but the Ashforth family put the project on hold for five years. In August 1947, the Commission approved a change of the northerly part of the land to multi-family housing.

In 1949, H. Adams Ashforth, Trustee of the Estate of Elizabeth Ashforth, sold 12 acres to Pierce Construction Company, owned by Chutnick and Sudakoff of Forest Hills, New York, for \$147,000. The project's architect, Nathan Seiderman of New York City, designed a garden apartment complex of thirteen buildings of concrete with brick veneer. The buildings were to occupy only one-quarter of the land, the remainder to be landscaped with lawn, trees, and shrubs or used for roads and sidewalks. (The architect later won an award for his concept of cluster building.) A building permit was issued on November 14, 1949; the Certificate of Occupancy was granted in January 1951. The thirteen buildings were named for the original thirteen states.

The individual units were rentals for almost 20 years; several were used as doctors' offices and Town Court Judge Gerald Tobin used another.

A major change in type of ownership occurred when the property was sold again, this time to Putnam Park Apartments, Inc., a Connecticut corporation that issued 100,000 shares and took out a \$2 million twenty-year mortgage. Shares were assigned to the apartments roughly in proportion to their square footage. (Second floor apartments were assigned additional shares as they were perceived to be more desirable. The share differential remains but what is considered a desirable location is a matter of personal need and preferences.) In the offering statements for the units, prices ranged from \$10,728 for the smallest 3½ room one to \$38,160 for the largest 8½ room duplex. Albert B. Ashforth, Inc. of New York City was the selling and managing agent. The price per share was \$36, with discounts offered to the residents who purchased the apartments they already occupied. The use of units as offices was disallowed and it was required that the units be owner-occupied.

The rules concerning offices and owner occupancy still hold. The share price, however, has changed considerably, as has the value of local real estate and the town around us. The original share price of \$36 climbed to approximately \$995 per share as of December 2006. The land of Putnam Park has indeed prospered over the years.

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Sources:

“Other Days of Greenwich” by Frederick A Hubbard

“The Great Estates of Greenwich, 1880-1930” by

The Junior League of Greenwich

Various Oral Histories

Historical Society of the Town of Greenwich

Minutes of the Town Plan Commission

Records of the Building Department and the Town Clerk of the Town of Greenwich