

From Farm to Suburb 1850-1917

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"Some men see things as they are and say why. Others see things as they should be and say why not." George Bernard Shaw.

John Stevens and William Van Duzer Lawrence were two men who saw things as they should be and said why not. Their separate visions are responsible for transforming the old Eastchester from a rustic farming village to the bustling suburban communities of today. At the end of the Civil War three quarters of Eastchester's land was still unimproved and farmers were still tilling the land and raising livestock. By the end of the nineteenth century and the very beginning of the twentieth the present town of Eastchester was in the process of being transformed into the bustling suburban communities of today. Bronxville would become a separate village within the present town of Eastchester in 1899 to be followed by Tuckahoe three years later. Mount Vernon had already become a separate city in 1892

John Stevens, a wealthy New York City merchant, had a vision and his vision would forever change Eastchester and Westchester County. His vision was to allow ordinary working people fleeing the exorbitant rents of New York City to buy affordable homes. He bought five adjoining farms in southern Eastchester consisting of 365 acres in close proximity to the New York and Harlem Railroad. By 1853 the newly formed village of Mount Vernon consisted of 300 homes, a population of 1370, a hotel, a railroad depot, and a church. By 1892 Mount Vernon had grown so large that it withdrew from the town of Eastchester and was incorporated as a city. Mount Vernon, where the original town of Eastchester was started in 1664, became known as "The City of Homes." A few years later New York City annexed the southern tip of the old town of Eastchester along with City Island from the town of Pelham.

The period from the end of the Civil War to the incorporation of Mount Vernon as a city in 1892 was a time of both stability and change. The marble quarries were still the chief employer in Tuckahoe; Hodgman rubber dating back to 1853 also was an important industry in the village. A large portion of the town still remained unimproved. Rich people still lived in large estates and farmers still tilled the soil.

But the town was changing. Hotels were built in the town of Eastchester, Bronxville, Mount Vernon, Union Corners (Chester Heights) and Tuckahoe. Neighborhoods started around Waverly Square, Highland, Prospect, and Tuckahoe Avenue, Maple Street, Union Corner's (Chester Heights) and Orchard Street. Some of the larger estates and farms in the present town

were broken up into smaller lots for speculative purposes. Some of these houses were built as boarding houses or homes for quarry workers. Others were larger homes for a developing middle class. In the hamlet of Bronxville within the few blocks between the Dutch Reform Church and the railroad, homes were built, along with a public school school, and small businesses such a grocery, a blacksmith shop, and a tannery.

The very separate vision of William Lawrence, a rich and recently retired Canadian millionaire, had the most lasting impact on the present town of Eastchester. His first impression of the hamlet of Bronxville was that it “a desolate and forsaken place.” The area near the railroad station was a “hospital for old broken-down freight cars that were shunted in and out upon side tracks. An old, tumbledown black smith shop with half a hundred wagons and pieces of wagons filled the remainder of the square.”

His vision was to create a planned community in Bronxville for wealthy people able to buy spacious and attractive homes within easy reach of the New York City. He purchased the run down 86 acre farm of James Prescott that was covered by an impenetrable tangle of underbrush. Once he began to build, the slow, controlled development of Bronxville would unfold. Lawrence Park on the hill directly to the northeast of the train station was his masterpiece. Artists and writers flocked to Bronxville at this time and the village became a hotbed of turn of the century culture. To this day Lawrence Park with its narrow lanes, tall trees, and large, architecturally significant homes remains one of the most attractive and expensive suburban developments in the country.

Bronxville was not the only part of the town that was growing as William Lawrence was buying land and building homes in Bronxville. The Tuckahoe Land and Improvement Company was building homes in the downtown district of the village between Main Street and Breckinridge (now Columbus) Avenue on Maynard, Breckinridge, Wallace, and High Street. In 1898 the first home was erected in the Gifford Park section of Tuckahoe just south of where Concordia College would be built 7 years later. In what would later be called the unincorporated part of the Eastchester homes were built around Waverly Square, Highland, Tuckahoe, and Prospect Avenues, and Maple street in the north end of the town.

Eastchester and its two villages was evolving into a railroad suburb as neighborhood by neighborhood farms, estates, and wilderness would be turned into planned clusters of homes in the first half of the twentieth century. Kenneth Jackson, America’s leading urban historian, pointed out in his pioneering book, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, that Westchester communities like Bronxville, Scarsdale, and other Westchester communities similar to Eastchester “set the pattern for many of the railroad suburbs in the United States today.”

