

by Sandor Balint

Chester Heights, a community in southern Eastchester situated between Bronxville to the west, North Pelham to the east, and Mt. Vernon to the south, is a flourishing hamlet that seems to have developed its own place and in its own way despite the diverse character of surrounding villages. One of the last to yield its prosperous farms and way of life to the twentieth century, it appears to have accepted — even welcomed — the urbanization and development thrust upon it. Flanked on the east by the Hutchinson River Parkway, on the west by the Cross County Parkway, on the north by the link-up of these two major arteries, and on the south by the busy and commercial New Rochelle Road, Chester Heights, in less than a century, has evolved from a cluster of farms (many of them leasehold arrangements with affluent land-owners) into a suburban community with a charm of its own and it appears to have done this with a good degree of grace, style, and forethought.

It persevered through the construction of a major railroad that split it geographically right down the middle.

A Railroad Comes and Goes

The old New York, Westchester, and Boston Railroad, in 1912, built a huge overhead railway station over what was then a dirt road called New Rochelle Road and over the green "common" which is in front of the present Union Corners firehouse. The railroad laid the track bed right off the backyards of the houses now running down the west side of Lockwood Avenue. Then, ignoring the name Union Corners which the community had had for over a century, it named the train station "Chester Heights." Yet

when the railroad went bankrupt in 1937 due to the market crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression, the community was deeply saddened and was in the forefront of a concerted effort to save the railroad. Although the defunct railroad left in its wake abandoned and crumbling stations and roadbeds, it was with a heavy heart that the local residents watched the dismantlement and eventual disappearance of this once modern and expensively-constructed rail line.

The community, now with two names — Union Corners and Chester Heights — had little trouble coping with a double name. It was just another anomaly to a hamlet that has paid its taxes to Eastchester, its water bills to New Rochelle, has telephone numbers that begin with a Pelham exchange, and is located in the Bronxville Postal District.

The hectic expansion of the area during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s may explain these helter-skelter designations, but Chester Heights moved into the twentieth century mostly in an orderly and generally well-planned fashion.

The community of Chester Heights (formerly called Union Corners) has an early history that is essentially that of the town it is a part of, namely, Eastchester. Originally, bands of Mohican Indians roamed the woods and hills, fished the two rivers — now the two constricted streams known as the Bronx and Hutchinson Rivers — and the many brooks in the area. The Indians called the Hutchinson River "Aqueanounck." The section of what is now Eastchester remained in the possession of the Indians until about 1700. Earlier, in 1653, Chief Wampage and other Indians sold land that was to become "old" Eastchester to Thomas Pell. This land, now part of Pelham and Mt. Vernon, ran well into the Bronx

to what is now Tremont Avenue. It did not include what we know as Eastchester.

This same Chief Wampage and his Indians ten years previously, in 1643, massacred Anne Hutchinson, all of her religious followers, and her entire family except for one daughter, Susannah, whom the Indians took as a captive. This massacre took place near what is now St. Paul's Church in northern Mount Vernon. Chief Wampage was so proud of his deed that he took the name "Ann Hook" to honor himself for the slaying of Anne Hutchinson. It took ten years for peace to return before the Indians began to sell their land to the white man.

About 1700, another real estate compact was reached with the Indians for 3308 acres of land then called the "Long Reach" which included all of present day Eastchester and the northern part of Mount Vernon. Records indicate that payment to the Indians for this acreage consisted of 14 guns, 12 coats, 12 kettles, 12 axes, 2 adzes (a heavy chisel-like tool) and 4 barrels of cider. In 1708 Queen Anne of England issued a patent the legalized Eastchester's claim to what is now Bronxville, Tuckahoe, and the Town Outside (the rest of Eastchester). It's sobering to think that all of Chester Heights was probably worth a kettle, or a coat or two, at one time.

The History of Westchester County, written in 1848, comments as follows on the area which is now Chester Heights:

"This town was no doubt more a hunting ground of the Indians than their place of residence. Wigwags, indeed, are found indicated far up on the banks of the Aqueanounck, or Hutchinson's River, but the marks are not of a permanent occupation. The territory, however, is full of the accessories of the chase, which have in these later years to come to the surface. The two tribes identified with this immediate region are the Sewanoys and the Weckquaesgeeks, the former of whom had their abodes nearer Long Island Sound, and the latter along the shores of the Hudson River."

Apparently other tribes felt free to hunt when the Mohicans began to leave.

This historical chronicle continues:

"In the Indian deed of the Town occur the names of Woriatapus, Ann Hood (whose earlier name was Wampage), Por-

rige (or Hopescoe), Gramatan, Pathune, Sagamore and Elias."

"The (Indians) were sometimes found dangerous neighbors. As early as 1675 it was deemed a wise precaution...to build a fort for defense against possible assault.... This was at the time when Deerfield and other villages in Massachusetts had been attacked, and there was fear that the ill-will had become general. The Indians appear to have remained in the vicinity up to a late period, and in the War of the Revolution to have taken sides with the colonists."

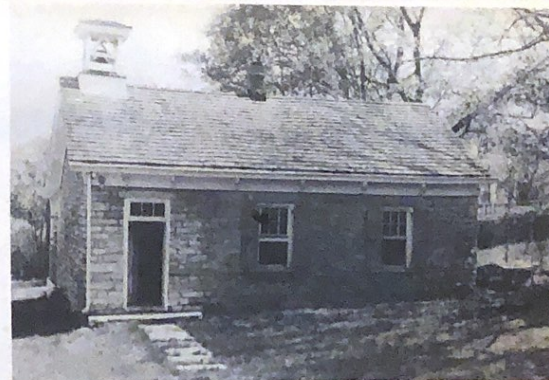
Revolutionary No Man's Land

During the Revolution Chester Heights consisted principally of widely-scattered farms. It was part of the no man's land between the British-held New York and the American-held northern part of Westchester County. Pillagers from both sides raided this "neutral ground" for cattle and family valuables. Skirmishes occurred frequently between these men and many backwoods fights occurred in this area. Many troops of the Revolution, both American and British, were to march these parts and the residents suffered divided loyalties in this "neutral ground." Friendships and even whole families were rent asunder during this tragic time.

Chester Heights entered the 19th century essentially a farming community. These productive farms, many leased to farmers by a few well-to-do citizens with large land holdings, while mostly truck farms, did include some pig farms which began about 1824.

The immaculate area around the confluence of what is now California Road and New Rochelle Road received the rather unflattering nickname of "Pig Hollow." In 1912, heeding local complaints, the Chester Heights Civic Association succeeded in ridding the area of these farms, coinciding incidentally with the grand opening of the New York, Westchester and Boston Railroad's Chester Heights station on New Rochelle Road and Oregon Avenue.

Because of the absence of specific deeds recording property transactions during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, survey maps and tax maps are the only records of early ownership of Chester Heights' real estate. One map, apparently drawn during the late 1600's, lists all the lands up to the northern reaches of the "Brunks



Marble Schoolhouse.

River" as "Pells North Line." This dispute was settled when Queen Anne of England issued a patent in 1798 that validated Eastchester's claim to what is now Bronxville, Tuckahoe, and the Town Outside.

Another survey map, dated 1797, lists James Morgan as owner of much of the land of contemporary Chester Heights, followed by a map dated 1851 listing M.S. Sherwood as owner of much of the local land. By 1861 Edward Hillman was listed as owner of 75 acres of land north of New Rochelle and Daniel Morgan owner of 60 acres south of New Rochelle Road. An Assessment map dated 1875 lists (from the Hutchinson River westward on the north side of New Rochelle Road) W.H. Archer 56.5 acres, C. Archer 25.9 acres, W. Smith 6, H. Stewart 2.6, Duffy 4.4, (School), Elliot 1.8. On the south side of New Rochelle Road west from the Hutchinson River, A.G Bowers 9.3 acres and J. Ganaon 48.8. Many of these land owners descended from titled English families and were very wealthy.

Subsequent maps record some changes in ownership, possibly confused somewhat by leasehold arrangements. By the turn of the 19th century; "Union Corners" was a growing collection of private homes, truck farms, small business establishments, and the Marble School.

The Marble School is the oldest building in Chester Heights. Built in 1835 for the education of the children of the areas of what is now

Bronxville, Tuckahoe, Chester Heights and part of Mount Vernon, its very existence today is an affirmation of the foresight and the public spirit of a number of local citizens through the years.

Built on White Plains Road (Route 22) near Devonia and California Roads in what is now Mt. Vernon, the school was moved in 1869 at a cost of \$1000 to the site on California Road off New Rochelle Road, where it stands. Its marble came from the quarries of Tuckahoe which at one time were supplying marble for such distinguished edifices as the New York Public Library, St. Patrick's Cathedral, and numerous national landmarks in Washington, D.C., including the Washington Monument. The plot of land was purchased by the school board from Thomas Elliott who received the contract to dismantle the Marble School and rebuild it on a new site. It existed as a school until 1884. After that, it was used occasionally as a meeting house for women's clubs such as the sewing circle from The Reformed Church in Bronxville. Later it was sold to Valentine Kloefer and was used occasionally to shod horses.

In 1952 Valentine Kloefer willed the old school to the town of Eastchester and in 1959 it was presented to the Eastchester Historical Society.

Under the aegis of the Society and with the loving guidance of Mrs. Madeline Schaeffer, the Society's vice-president and librarian, the school has been painstakingly



restored to recreate a schoolhouse of the 1840's. It is more than an historical school now; it is also a museum. It has a valuable collection of 19th century household and sewing articles, jewelry, costumes, toys, and other rare memorabilia.

The Society has just completed a library building behind the Marble School with thousands of reference volumes and rare juvenile books.

In addition to Mrs. Schaeffer, the officers of the society, H. Bianchi, President; Mary Grogan, Recording Secretary; Arthur Henle, Treasurer; and Mrs. Angelo H Bianchi, Curator, hold yearly Victorian Christmas parties for local residents, present seminars and slide programs for students and civic groups, guide schoolbus tours, and researches in local history projects.

The corner of New Rochelle and California Roads became indeed a very active location during the latter part of the 19th century and well into the 20th.

In the 1870's a tavern was erected called Union Corners Hotel, more popularly referred to as Fischer's Tavern. The town's single fire engine was housed to the rear of the tavern in a long, low building called Union Corners Hotel Sheds. The Albany Post Road, a major link between New York and Connecticut, at one point in the late 19th Century, ran along side Fisher's Tavern and it was a stopover inn for stage coach travelers to and from Connecticut.

Before the railroads came, travel to and from New York City was via

the Red Bird Stage Coach Line. The stage coach left the Bowery in New York at 7:00 am carrying mail and passengers to Danbury, Connecticut. It then left Danbury at 6:00 pm for the return trip. The Union Corners Hotel was said to be halfway point between these two terminals. The hotel was a popular local meeting place and even the Chester Heights Taxpayers Association held its meetings here as there was no suitable alternative. A large picnic area back of the hotel was a popular attraction for local residents. Groups of people would come with lunches to picnic under the tall oaks and maples.

The red fire gong, currently mounted in front of the present firehouse, can be seen clearly in old photographs set atop the Union Corners Hotel Sheds. Volunteers from the Chester Heights were summoned by this fire gong.

The Union Corners Hose Company was formally organized in 1904, although Union Corners had hydrants as early as 1890 — well before the hose company was formed. In 1931, Union Corners Engine and Hose Co. No. 4 moved to its new firehouse where it is currently located at the top of Oregon Avenue.

Fischer's Tavern was torn down in 1960 to widen New Rochelle Road at that point, this bit of gay nineties nostalgia a victim of progress.

The advent of the New York, Westchester and Boston Railroad (Westchester Railroad or N.Y., W. & B.) on July 5, 1912 ushered Chester





Union Corners Hotel — better known as Fischer's Tavern in 1913. Note the dirt roads which lasted well into the 20's.

Heights solidly into the Twentieth Century.

An all-electric railroad, it was considered the last word in train service with its speed, quietness, and cleanliness. Although it passed through many rural and unpopulated sections, its planners and investors anticipated swift development of these areas. Though the ridership did increase, it was never near what had been expected, and the line lost money for the 25 years of its existence. While Westchester's population did expand rapidly during the 1920's, it was a lodestone for people of considerable means who could afford their own cars and were not enamored of public transportation. The fact that N.Y. Central and New Haven lines offered direct access to Grand Central Station was another militating factor. From country to suburbia in a few decades there was an ever increasing demand in Westchester for more roads and parkways. The age of the automobile had arrived and the N.Y. W. & B. was one of its first victims. It cost \$16,000 to demolish the once-handsome Chester Heights train station (built in modified Italian renaissance style) and the tracks from the Westchester line were sent to a Louisiana army camp to help in the teaching of railroading in World War II.

Chester Heights developed rapidly during the 1920's. A chief developer was H.A. Lockwood & Co. which set up headquarters for developing on the northeast corner of Lockwood Avenue and New Rochelle Road, now marked by an apartment house, N02 Lockwood.

Mr. Louis Archer, the last surviving member of a venerable English family which came here during the early colonial days, sold his part of the Archer estate to Mr. Lockwood for developing. Archer, born here about 100 years ago and regarded as the first citizen of Chester Heights, was a dignified gentleman of another time. He lived with his wife on Archer Drive and took great interest in the development of the area. He had been born in a large manor built by his grandfather on what is now Archer Drive. The entrance was on New Rochelle Road. A long driveway flanked by Dutch elms led to the main house, which was destroyed by a fire in 1924. Archer died about ten years ago at the age of 90.

Mr. Gus Innecken, an architect who took great pride in his work, also bought many of the lots and built numerous houses in the area. There were a number of other builders at work and Chester Heights grew very quickly in the 1920's. The lovely maple tree-lined Lockwood Avenue, among others, owes its appeal to the foresight of some of these developers. The houses, priced from \$12,000 to \$20,000 in the early mid 1920's, sold very rapidly until the stock market crash of 1929.

Many local people lost their homes at that time, and turned them back to the banks. Most mortgages were from \$6000 to \$8000 at 4% interest with taxes ranging from \$400 to \$500 a year. Nevertheless, the Great Depression made it impossible for many people to meet these debts and it was a difficult time for all. The high school boys and girls walked all the

way to New Rochelle High School and the young children were bused up to the Village School in Tuckahoe. Mrs. Karl, one of the few original home-owners left has been in the neighborhood for fifty-five years. She fondly recalls the days when the local German farmers kept truck farms and trucked their produce into New Rochelle and Mt. Vernon.

Jack Warner, founder of Warner Bros. Movie Studio, had a large mansion on California Road. A number of silent movies were filmed in this neighborhood during the years 1913-1916. Among these movies many Keystone Cops episodes were filmed on California and New Rochelle Roads.

The structure on New Rochelle Road, recently gutted by fire opened its string of stores originally in 1928. Included were Nos. 495-97-99. No. 500 New Rochelle Road was built in 1936, with more

shops developed in 1959-60 and 1969.

Hanna's Service Station opened in 1937 and the Mobil Station was renovated in 1969 from an earlier structure. Chester Heights Gardens was put up in 1955.

The parking lot and shops west of Alta Drive were a 1970's renovation from a Shopwell supermarket construction in the early 1960's.

The building and row of stores from Chester Heights Bakery east was built in the 1920's by the family of Gene Sarazen, the famous golfer. The bank and adjacent structure were built about fifteen years ago.

This commercial area of Chester Heights has come a long way from the one general store existing at the turn of the century. Called Lauricellas General Store, it was located near the current bakery, moved to the site of Hanna's Service Station, and finally gave way to the sedulous development of that part of New Rochelle Road.

Chester Heights has retained the qualities of a small town virtually within the shadows of New York's skyscrapers. While its unique location offers easy access to major highways and shopping centers, its residents can enjoy their proximity to golf clubs, horse farms, fish ponds, and natural woodlands. Chester Heights can take pride in its singular attributes as Westchester approaches its Tri-Centennial year.

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Grateful thanks are extended to long-time Chester Heights resident Mr. Leslie Harte and Madeline Schaeffer for their invaluable help in researching this article.

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Union Corners Hose Company — trying out an early piece of equipment in front of Fischer's Tavern, which was headquarters for the company for many years.