

## **J Walter Thompson and Cranford's Suburban Development**

*By Vic Bary*



**J Walter Thompson**

### Beginnings

While recognized as the inventor of modern advertising and advertising agencies, J Walter Thompson was also one of the driving forces behind Cranford's development as a highly desirable suburban bedroom community for New York executives – in spite of the fact that he may never have actually lived here.

Born October 28, 1847 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, James Walter Thompson spent most of his childhood in Fremont, Ohio. While a distant cousin of Theodore Roosevelt, his roots were definitely very modest. In 1864 he joined the US Navy and served through 1865, then enlisted in the Marines for a year's service in 1867. The following year he joined the magazine advertiser Carlton & Smith Company in New York City, most of whose business was with religious publications. And it's here that the JWT story really begins.

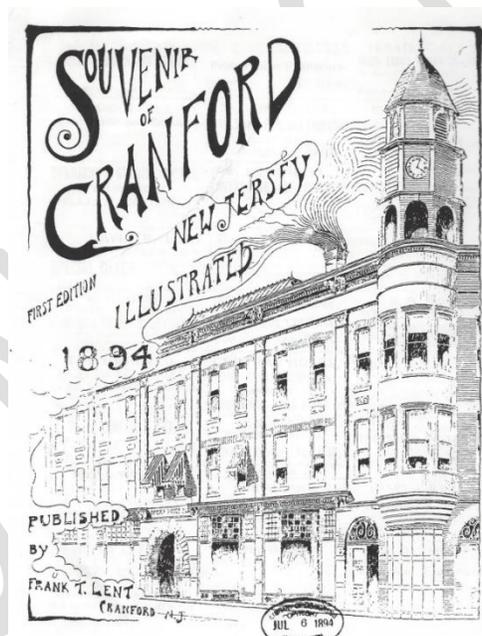
While hired by Carlton & Smith as a bookkeeper and general assistant, he soon switched to the sales department where he rightly concluded the real money was to be made. He was so successful, that in 1877, he bought Carlton & Smith for \$500. The following year he bought its office furniture for another \$800. He decided that "James Thompson" was too common a name in New York City to use as a company name, so he instead named his new firm "J Walter Thompson".

In 1887 Thompson adopted the Lamp and Owl icon which he said represented science and wisdom. He repeatedly restated his credo – “Skilled work, when published, costs no more than work without skill. So that the best work, such as I give, is the cheapest because it brings better results.” By 1889 it had – when **80%** of all US magazine advertising was placed through J. Walter Thompson.

In 1896 J Walter Thompson incorporated the firm. In 1899, it became the first US advertising firm to expand internationally when a London office was opened. He sold the firm at retirement in 1916, and lived for another twelve years.

### J Walter Thompson – Cranford Developer

The first documented involvement of J Walter Thompson in Cranford’s suburban development was his 1892 building of the Opera House Block. Thompson would use his employee James Rodgers to manage it (and later projects) and hired noted regional architect Frank T. Lent to design the block. Local newspapers indicated that ownership of the Opera House Block was in the name of Thompson’s wife, Margaret Riggs Thompson. (The Block burned to the ground in a massive fire February 3, 1912. It was rebuilt by then current owner Thomas Sperry.)



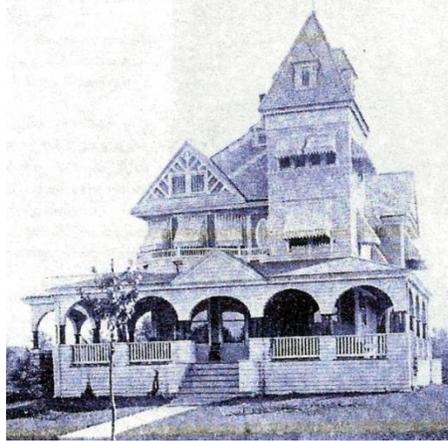
**Opera House Block – Lent Brochure 1894**

Frank T. Lent would go on to design a number of other commercial and residential buildings in Cranford and would live here for a decade.

The next major project Thompson was involved in (with the Sperry brothers Thomas A. and William M.) was the original Cranford Casino. Designed by Frank T. Lent and rented to the Cranford Country Club, it was erected in 1892 and burned to the ground in January, 1897. It was replaced by the end of the year with the second Cranford Casino, this one not designed by Lent.

## Roosevelt Manor

In late 1894, Thompson and the Sperry's launched the ambitious "Roosevelt Manor" development (named for a Thompson brother, not the President) which stretched from Riverside Avenue (later renamed Riverside Drive) on the SW, to Orange Avenue on the NW to Manor Avenue on the NE, and Union Avenue North on the SE. Once again, Thompson chose James Rodgers (whose magnificent Lent-designed house at 9 Claremont Place still stands) to manage the project, and Frank T. Lent as one of two architects for Roosevelt Manor suggested house designs. (The other architect was H. Galloway Ten Eyck of Newark.)



**James Rodgers Home 9 Claremont Place**

Advertising "You buy the lot, we'll build the house", Roosevelt Manor offered a number of model houses it could build, but left the choice of house design and builder up to the buyer of the any of its 150 lots. Newspaper articles of the time show that sales took off at once, many handled by local realtor H. T. Gurney, and continued strongly. Today Roosevelt Manor remains one of Cranford's most prestigious neighborhoods, containing the finest collection of late 19<sup>th</sup> century, early 20<sup>th</sup> century homes.

## Did J Walter Thompson Actually Live Here?

While local legend has it that he did, in fact that he built the Opera House and Casino to convince Mrs. Thompson to give up Manhattan sophistication for the suburban charms of Cranford that may be more urban myth than realty. (And I must admit to perpetuating it earlier in an architectural history of Cranford DVD.) My review of local Cranford city directories (which started in 1901) found no listings for J Walter Thompson. The 1900 US Census lists him as living at 13 West 76<sup>th</sup> Street New York City, with his wife, son Walter R. (age 8) and eight household staff. The 1910 and 1920 US Census lists him at 14 West 76<sup>th</sup> Street, living with his wife and 18-year old son "William" R. Thompson (1910 Census), and five to six household staff.

In spite of all he did for Cranford - the numerous properties that he built, owned and sold, and the many visits he made here - it appears that J Walter Thompson (to his great loss) was never actually a Cranford resident.

Sources:

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6. [https://en.wikipedia.org/J.\\_Walter\\_Thompson](https://en.wikipedia.org/J._Walter_Thompson).
7. Lent, Frank T., “Souvenir of Cranford New Jersey 1894”, Cranford, NJ, 1894.
8. [library/duke.edu/Rubenstein/collections/creators/corporations/jwt1](http://library/duke.edu/Rubenstein/collections/creators/corporations/jwt1).
9. *The Citizen and Chronicle*, various.
10. *The Cranford Chronicle*, various.