

The Birth and Growth of Cranford Part II:

From the Coming of the Rail Road through Roosevelt Manor

by Vic Bary

The Coming of the Railroad

In 1838, the Elizabeth Town and Somerville Railroad (forerunner of the Central Railroad of New Jersey) was formed, starting with two trains a day, one in each direction. There was no downtown Crane's Ford at that time, and the train stopped at an empty field nearest the house of a local resident originally from the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The stop was called "French House" for want of any local name. The train service had no perceptible impact on the local economy. On July 4, 1849, local students attending a Sunday School picnic as the guests of Josiah Crane scrawled "Craneville" on his barn as they departed. The name caught on and began to be used to identify our town.

One of the village's first non-residential structures - built in 1851 - was the community's first purpose-built church - Union Chapel. It stood on what would later be named Alden Street between North Union (then Main Street) and North Avenues, and served both the Presbyterian and the (smaller) Methodist congregations. They had previously met at alternate times in the Old Red School House. Union Chapel would later be renamed the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodists would once again have to content themselves with the Old Red School House (until they built their own church in 1863). The local power structure, as may be surmised, was predominated by Republican Presbyterians.

The Land Speculators Arrive

The railroad-breakthrough for Craneville occurred in 1864, when the Jersey Central completed a railroad bridge across Newark Bay, allowing the railroad to link Craneville with New Yorkers arriving in Jersey City by ferryboat. One of the very first to arrive and set down stakes in Craneville was Sylvester Cahill, who promptly bought the 51-acre Ebenezer Hart farm east of the Rahway River (an area that would later form the core of "Roosevelt Manor") for \$10,000. The outbreak of the Civil War (in which Cahill may have been involved in some capacity) prevented him from further land purchases. At the end of the War, he added another 21 acres at the upper end of the now named Elizabeth Avenue and Cranford Avenue from Benjamin Garthwaite for \$4,000. In 1867 he added an additional 26 acres on the east side of Union Avenue from Elizabeth Avenue to the river, paying owner Claud Grippo \$9,600 for the property. With nearly 100 acres, Cahill was now Craneville's largest landowner.

The other major land developer in the 1860s was Alden Bigelow, also a New Yorker, and brother to Sylvester Cahill's wife, Mary Bigelow Cahill. In 1864, he purchased 37 acres of mostly apple orchards on the west side of the Rahway River from Josiah Crane, Jr. He was soon joined by his brothers William and Charles, and by Miln Dayton and Allen Eastman in an enterprise to develop the land. That same year, 1864, the Jersey Central built a railroad station in Craneville, increasing the potential desirability of the village for those who worked in New York, but wanted a home in more bucolic surroundings. At that time, there were only seven residential buildings within a one-mile radius of the new station.

Development Begins

Development of residential Craneville started with the firm of Dayton, Eastman and Bigelow, who laid out streets and 30 lots in 1865 in an area bounded by Springfield Avenue, Union Avenue, Alden Street and Holly Street. Bigelow had built his own mansion – Marlborough Place – the previous year in what is now Cleveland Plaza. This two-block area formed the expanding Craneville commercial center.



This development was followed by development of Central Avenue by Dr. Phineas P. Lounsbury, inventor of “Dr. Lounsbury’s Malt Extract”, a patent medicine manufactured in one of the local mills. Business must have been good, as Lounsbury was Cranford's top tax payer in 1868 and again in 1869.

In 1870, Sylvester Cahill built Forest Avenue parallel to the river, and ran Cranford Avenue from it up to Elizabeth Avenue in order to start developing his land. The year before, the town got its first post office, which adopted the name “Cranford”, a new name for the town decided upon in a local town meeting.

Cranford Becomes a Township

On March 12, 1871, led by Sylvester Cahill, Cranford successfully petitioned the state to be incorporated as a township in its own right. The new township was formed out of sections of the older communities of Westfield, Rahway, Union, Linden, Springfield and Clark. Cranford’s population now stood at 600, a tenfold increase from 1850.

The new Township would be governed by a committee of five, one each elected by and representing voters in one of the township's four districts. A fifth committeeman-at-large represented and was elected by all the township voters. The committee elected one of its own as "President" (later Mayor). Included among the first committeemen were Josiah Crane, Jr. and Sylvester Cahill. Cahill was named the Township's first Committee President. Beginning in 1901, all committee members would be elected by and represent the township as a whole.

At the very first Township meeting, the committee members authorized the 10-year lease of a parcel of land to serve Cranford as a "pound". (The jail in Elizabeth would continue to be used to house prisoners.) In 1876, Cranford built its first town hall near the site now occupied by the Cranford Theater.

Police and Fire

In 1869, two years before Cranford was incorporated, Sylvester Cahill, and seven other prominent citizens (including Alden and Charles Bigelow) successfully petitioned the State to form a Thief Detecting Society to provide law and order for the growing village. (Since Cranford was then a village comprised of sections of five abutting incorporated towns - Clark, Rahway, Springfield, Westfield and Union - it had no standing to form its own municipal police force.) This essentially private police force was given a twenty-year charter by the State. Cranford Township also elected constables, and the longest serving was Joshua Bryant, who served 10 years between 1881 and 1893 (which made him Cranford's first African-American elected official). Cranford did not have uniformed police officers until 1899.

By the early 1890s, Cranford had two volunteer fire companies. Union Hose Company No. 1 was organized November 15, 1892. Five months later on April 17, 1893, Hook and Ladder Truck Company No. 1 was organized. Both volunteer fire companies were quite proud of their state of the art horse-drawn fire vehicles.



Residential Building Begins

The word “development” used above to describe the activities of Cahill, Bigelow & company, and Lounsbury does not mean that homes had been built, but rather that the land had been divided into lots for sale, and dirt streets put in. An 1870 map by N. G. Foster shows the block bounded by Alden, Miln, Springfield Avenue and North Union, to contain only the A. B. Bigelow mansion, the A. F. Purves mansion, and the Presbyterian Church. Holly Street contains only Public School No. 1, the wooden school built in 1869, and predecessor to the later brick Grant School.

Development was no doubt delayed by the five and half year Depression that lasted from October, 1873 to March 1879. Recovery afterward was slow and accompanied by additional short lived recessions. The oil-fed street lamps that Cranford ordered in 1872, for example, weren't paid for and delivered until 1884. Even by that year, Cranford was without sewer, water, and gas lines.

The 1888 Lockett map of the same area shows houses on the SE side of Holly Street between Springfield Avenue and Alden Street and many on Miln and North Union Avenue. The desirable summer homes on the river side of Holly had yet to be built. A 1909 Union County Tax Map shows virtually every lot on Holly, Alden, Eastman and Miln containing a residence. A review of the many remaining original houses on these blocks confirms this analysis, reflecting houses in architectural styles popular in the 1880s, 1890s and first decade of the 20th century.

The Opera House Block

The next individual to have a major impact on Cranford development was J. Walter Thompson, inventor of modern magazine advertising through his eponymous firm J. W. Thompson. He commissioned local architect Frank T. Lent to design the Opera House Block at the intersection of North Union Avenue and Eastman Street. Completed in, 1892, it included a 600-seat auditorium which would be the site of many entertainments (until it burnt to the ground February 3, 1912). Lent also designed the Cranford Casino on Riverside Drive, which was completed in October, 1892. (It burnt on January 26, 1897 and was rebuilt on the same site.)



Roosevelt Manor

In 1894, J. Walter Thompson announced his development of “Roosevelt Manor” (named after his brother, not a President) along the northerly banks of the Rahway River on Riverside Avenue. The site was believed to have been the location of an earlier Unami Indian village, and many Indian artifacts were found there. Roosevelt Manor was comprised of 150 building sites averaging 50’x 150’, and selling for \$750 to \$1,500 according to size and location. Roosevelt Manor was bounded by Orange Ave on the NW, Willow (now Manor) Ave on the NE, North Union Ave on the SE, and Riverside Avenue (now Drive) on the SW. The map of the planned new development showed the Casino and four existing houses south of it on Riverside Avenue, and the north side of North Union Avenue already occupied by 7 existing homes from Riverside to a mid-point between Claremont Place and Linden Place. Thompson appointed JWT employee James D. Rodgers to manage the development of Roosevelt Manor.

Advertising “You buy the lot – we build the house”, the Roosevelt Manor promotional brochure offered a number of sample house designs – four by architect Frank T. Lent, and three by H. Galloway Ten Eyck (Newark) - which it would build for prices ranging from \$3,750 to \$6,500. Roosevelt Manor would come to include homes owned by J. Walter Thompson and James D. Rodgers, and was bounded by homes owned by Thomas A. Sperry (co-founder of S&H Green Stamps) and his brother William Sperry (whose home burnt March 13, 1900). Roosevelt Manor includes some of the largest and most stately early homes to be found in present day Cranford. By 1900, the population of Cranford had increased to 2,854.

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