

## Summer and Cranford, Perfect Together

*By Vic Bary*

Summer is finally upon us, a time when we look forward to warm weather pursuits. Did you know that summer and summer pursuits played a key role in the development of Cranford in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? A bit of historical background will help us understand why.

The area that would become Craneville and later Cranford was originally part of the west fields of Elizabethtowne and was settled in the second decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when 100 acre tracts of land west of the Rahway River awarded to the Denman and Crane families were settled by them. These early pioneers planted crops and established mills along the river, starting an agrarian economy. Things didn't change much for the next hundred+ years. As late as 1850, Craneville boasted a total population of only 60. But progress and land development were about to change all that.

From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century on, the Second Industrial Revolution took hold in America-and things, especially transportation, began to change rapidly. As early as 1838, Cranford was served by a railroad (the Elizabethtown and Somerville Railroad, forerunner of the Central RR of New Jersey), but with no connection to New York, it did nothing to accelerate Craneville's development. All that changed in 1861, when a railroad bridge across Newark Bay allowed the Central Railroad of New Jersey to offer train service to New Yorkers arriving at its terminal by ferry. The ferries brought New York businessmen intent on buying and developing land in Cranford and other communities served by rail.



Sylvester Cahill

One of the first New Yorkers off the train to Craneville was Sylvester Cahill, who bought a 51-acre tract of land east of the Rahway River in 1861, but failed to develop it for nearly 20 years. Four years after Cahill's arrival, Alden Bigelow (whose sister was married to Sylvester Cahill), joined by his brothers William and Charles, and by Miln Dayton and Allen Eastman, bought a 37-acre tract of apple orchards from Josiah Crane for the purpose of development. They began that development shortly thereafter, building 30 residences in an area bounded by Holly Street, Alden Street, Union Avenue and Springfield Avenue, the heart of the community that would soon be incorporated as Cranford. In 1870, Sylvester Cahill took his parcel of land and built Forest Avenue along the Rahway River, and Cranford Avenue from it to Elizabeth Avenue (the route to Elizabeth), and built

houses along his new streets. When Cranford was incorporated a year later (1871), this flurry of development had already increased the township's population tenfold to 600.

So what's the connection between Cranford and summer? To understand it, you have to recall what summer in the cities was like in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cities were crowded and the major source of power (for furnaces, factories, and trains) was coal. The air was sooty and filled with unpleasant smells. The invention of modern air conditioning was still 75 years away, and even as late as 1965 was found in only ten percent of homes. Even for the wealthy, the only way (other than relocating) of seeking any relief from the summer swelter was to open all the windows, and invite the soot and smell of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into their homes.

As city folk themselves, Cranford's new real estate developers were well aware of what summer in the city was like. They promoted their new community using two separate appeals. First, they drew attention to the excellent rail service placing Cranford just 45 minutes from Manhattan, and encouraged city professionals to relocate to the "country". (Advertising magnate J. Walter Thompson was so enticed, but only after he built an Opera House here in 1892 to induce a reluctant Mrs. Thompson to give up the cultural offerings of New York City.) For Manhattanites who could not be persuaded to abandon the city on a permanent basis, they promoted Cranford as a paradise where a summer home could be owned or rented. While dad toiled in the city during the week, mom and the kids could enjoy an idyllic life along the Rahway. The summer retreat appeal was so successful; the Cranford Chronicle reported that a separate summer phone book had to be issued by 1909.

The river offered families, and especially young males, swimming, fishing, trapping, and most importantly, boating in the summer (and skating in the winter). The first river regatta was conducted June 8, 1889, sponsored by the Cranford Boating Club. The first River Carnival was held a month later, and the following year, the first of what would become a long string of annual Venetian River Carnivals was held. According to Louis E. Henderson writing in Cranford New Jersey Illustrated, published in 1904:

"Thousands of people are attracted here to witness the beautiful parade of gaily-decorated boats and canoes, to see fireworks and hear the music of brass bands and witness the brilliantly-illuminated homes, lawns, river banks, and bridges.... At the conclusion of the carnival a dance and reception usually follows at the pretty Casino Club House. Prizes are awarded for the best-decorated boats, canoes and floats, and for the two best illuminated lawns. (p.96)"

The Business Realty Company, publisher of Cranford: The Venice of New Jersey, described the Venetian Carnivals and their attendance as follows:

"On these occasions the depths of the foliage and the trees along the winding river banks are decorated with myriads of lanterns of all shapes and colors, and the banks are ablaze with chemical fire and fireworks. The crowd throngs the banks and the bridges; the bands play their sweetest strains; and the procession of beautifully and fantastically decorated boats, peopled by Cranford's prettiest girls and their swains, glides in mysterious array the entire navigable length of the stream and back. As many as ten thousand visitors have been present at a carnival.... (pp. 8-9)"

Cranford in the summer offered a welcome and engaging retreat from summer in the city; summer and Cranford's rapid development were inextricably linked together.

Sources:

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2. Bary, Victor, "The North Cranford Historic District", Cranford Historic Preservation Advisory Board, 2012
3. Unsigned article, *Cranford Chronicle*, June 6, 1909
4. Henderson, Louie E., Cranford New Jersey Illustrated, Cranford, NJ, 1904
5. Business Realty Company, Cranford: The Venice of New Jersey, Cranford, NJ , 1925/1926