

## Severin R. Droescher and a Dream Forestalled

*By Vic Bary*

### The Early Years

Born in Hohenzollern Germany in 1866, Severin Robert Droescher emigrated to the U.S. as a young man in 1881. Twenty years later (1901), he settled in Cranford, soon afterward buying a large circa 1820 residence at 362 Lincoln Avenue East. By the time he settled in Cranford, Droescher was already a successful businessman. Ten years before his arrival in Cranford, he had founded the S. R. Droescher Company at 79 Warren Street in New York City. The company imported high quality straight razors and cutlery from Germany. The razors were marketed under the SRD brand, and are quite sought after today by collectors.



*S. R. Droescher*

Sometime shortly after his arrival in Cranford, Droescher began manufacturing razor hones at the Vreeland Mill on the Rahway River at Lincoln Avenue East. He named his firm the Cranford Oil Stone Company. Droescher became immediately active in his new community, purchasing and selling property, and becoming an initial shareholder in the Cranford Trust Company to which he was later named a director.

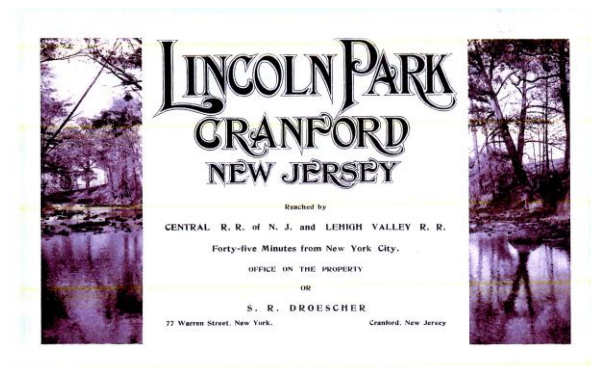
On August 28, 1906, Droescher bought the Vreeland Mill property outright. (It has been known as Droescher's Mill ever since.) Droescher immediately began improving the mill property, rebuilding the dam and installing floodgates, and constructing fieldstone retaining walls along the banks of the Rahway. He also built a footbridge, river overlook, stone gazebo and a walled central island. (Droescher also ran the Cranford Razor Works from his mill from 1916-1924.)



*The Falls*

### The "Lincoln Park" Dream

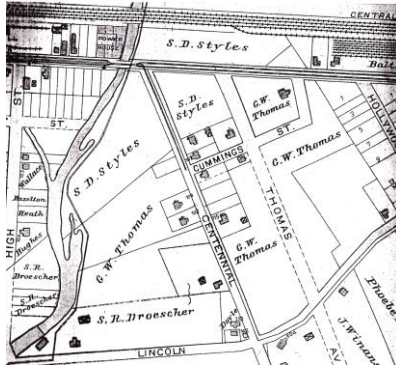
Droescher was more than just an obsessed new property owner. He had a dream; he planned to build an exclusive South Side gated community targeted to the New York commuter - "Lincoln Park" - which was to rival J. Walter Thompson's earlier Roosevelt Manor on the North Side of town.



Droescher's elegant new development would be divided into two sections (italics will be used to denote the section names). *Lincoln Park* would be built on 68 lots (either 100' X 160', or 75' X 100') lying on the west side of Centennial Avenue (between South Avenue and Lincoln Avenue East). Another 147 building lots (either 60' X 170', or 60' X 150') would comprise *Lincoln Heights*, lying on the east side of Centennial Avenue. *Lincoln Heights* would be bounded by the north side of South Avenue, Lincoln Avenue East on the south, and on the east side by Burchfield Avenue.

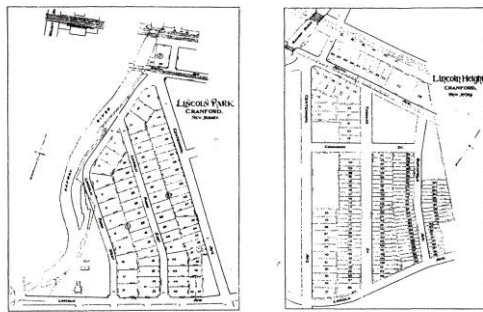
### Laying the Foundations

In 1910, Droescher made two land purchases which gave him the property he would need for "Lincoln Park". The March 10 *Cranford Chronicle* reported his purchase from Styles and Cash of a 12-acre tract on South Avenue bordering the river. The July 28 *Cranford Citizen* reported Droescher's purchase of property owned by G. W. Thomas along South Avenue to Lincoln Avenue. It said he now owned all vacant property in the whole section bounded by the railroad, Hollywood Avenue, Lincoln Avenue and the river. With these two large land purchases completed, Droescher was ready to lay out his dream suburban subdivision.



1906 map

In 1912 Droscher published his 31-page promotional brochure promoting "Lincoln Park" and extolling the virtues of Cranford and the ease of commuting to New York from his planned development. The brochure was filled with photos of attractively laid out streets and lovely river frontage complete with fieldstone walls and places to linger. It also showed all the streets and lots planned for his two subdivisions.



Maps of Lincoln Park and Lincoln Heights, Cranford, New Jersey.

LP Street Grid



Lincoln Park West

The following year, the February 13, 1913 *Cranford Chronicle* reported that ground was broken for the New Lincoln School on property sold by Droscher for a price less than comparable sites. The

school site comprised about 30% of the *Lincoln Heights* lots above Lincoln Avenue and fronting on Centennial and Thomas Avenues below Cummings Street. (Throughout his time in Cranford, Droescher would be generous in offering the Township property which it needed.) "Lincoln Park" was beginning to shrink even before the first houses were built.

On July 17, 1913 the *Cranford Chronicle* reported that the foundations had been laid for the first of several new dwellings to be erected in *Lincoln Heights* on Thomas Street. Lincoln Park East and West - the streets running parallel to Centennial Avenue on the east and the Rahway river on the west must have been laid by mid-1914, as the June 18 *Cranford Chronicle* reported that they were private streets which Droescher had closed because damage had been done to property.

### War Clouds Gather, Then Break

And now a bit of history, which may explain why "Lincoln Park" would fail to develop as planned.

With the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on July 28, 1914, the European powers began the "War to End all Wars", pitting the Allied Powers of England, France and Russia against the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. The United States formally took an isolationist position, yet it clearly favored the Allied Powers, and sold munitions and war materials to them. This so-called "neutrality" didn't fool Germany. In April, 1915 the German Consulate published a warning in U.S. newspapers next to the notice of the May 1 New York to Liverpool sailing schedule for the ocean liner "Lusitania". It stated that ships flying the flag of Great Britain were subject to being engaged by German war ships. The Germans knew that Lusitania's holds contained a large amount of munitions and war materials. The ocean liner sailed on May 1, and on May 7 the German submarine U-20 sunk it off southern Ireland with the loss of 1,119 lives, 123 of them American.

The following year, on July 30, 1916, German agents started fires at the "Black Tom" munitions depot in Jersey City. Two million pounds of ammunition and 100,000 pounds of TNT ignited, blowing out windows for miles around. It was becoming increasingly difficult to remain neutral.

The final straw came in early 1917, when England gave the U.S. the intercepted "Zimmermann Telegram" sent from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to Heinrich von Eckhardt, his ambassador to Mexico. The telegram told Eckhardt that, if the U.S. entered into war against Germany as a result of Germany's planned resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1, he was to propose to Mexico that it join Germany in war against the U.S. It promised Mexico funds and assistance in reconquering Texas and the American Southwest.

President Wilson released the telegram to the Associated Press on March 1, 1917. A day later, Zimmermann foolishly authenticated it. On March 18, German submarines sunk three American ships. On April 6, 1917, the U.S. Congress approved a declaration of war against Germany.

### Did Anti-German Feeling Doom "Lincoln Park"?

We know today that "Lincoln Park" was actually realized as a mere fraction of what was originally planned. Bob Fridlington and Larry Fuhro have stated that "anti-German sentiment that accompanied America's entry into World War I destroyed Droescher's plan for the park." Unfortunately, neither researcher is alive today to tell us what led them to this conclusion. The only

evidence of such feelings captured in local newspapers is an April 12, 1917 article in the *Cranford Chronicle* reprinting a "Denial" Droescher had published three days earlier in the *Elizabeth Daily Journal*. The article said that Droescher was "considerably provoked by the circulation of reports reflecting on his loyalty." He further stated that he "has been a citizen of the United States for thirty-eight years and has been a citizen of Cranford for sixteen years. ... He has two sons who he says will be willing to fight for this country." (One son, Robert Jr., did serve.)

Were there really such rumors circulating, or was Droescher simply firing a pre-emptive shot three days after his country's entry into WW I to protect his reputation and "Lincoln Park"? There was nothing published in Cranford newspapers over the next 20 years which answers this question. Reviews of 40+ Cranford Historical Society oral histories have uncovered no discussions about WWI anti-German feeling directed at Droescher, even though several interviewees discussed Droescher or anti-German feeling during WW I (e.g., German was dropped as a high school foreign language offering). What we do know is that Droescher was an important member of the community, serving on the Township Committee from 1910-1912, was active in the local Republican Party, and was an original stockholder of the Cranford Trust Company. After WWI, he represented Cranford for 10 years (1924-1934) on the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders, and was vice president of the Cranford Building and Loan. Upon his death April 2, 1936, Cranford Mayor George Osterheldt proclaimed a thirty-day period of mourning during which Township flags were to be lowered to half-staff. Hardly the resume of a pariah.

#### Droescher Sells His Choicest Lots To A Single Individual

In 1917, Charles E. Kaltenbach, co-owner of a prosperous silk firm in Newark, with branches in Allentown and Cranford, purchased a house and a plot at Thomas and Cummings Streets from Droescher, his close friend. Three years later, the April 22, 1920 the *Cranford Chronicle* reported that Kaltenbach had broken ground on a 25-room mansion that was to be one of the finest homes in Cranford. The "grounds" purchased on which to build this mansion were every plot in *Lincoln Park* between Lincoln Park West and Lincoln Park East, the largest and choicest plots in all of "Lincoln Park". The mansion was to be called "Greystone", and Lincoln Park West was torn out to allow the resulting grounds to be landscaped. With this purchase, and the sale of the lots for Lincoln School, "Lincoln Park" had shrunk to about half its planned size. Did Droescher sell his best lots to close friend and fellow German-American Kaltenbach because anti-German sentiment had stalled his sales for individual lots? Or did Kaltenbach simply make him an offer too good to refuse? The written record is silent.

#### What the Sanborn Fire Maps Reveal

The Sanborn Fire Maps for the "Lincoln Park" area reveal just how slowly it developed (or more to the point, failed to develop). The 1915 map (sheet 9) shows three houses built on Thomas Street and three more on the west side of Centennial Avenue. The 1922 map (sheets 5 & 6) shows 18 houses completed on Burchfield Avenue and three additional houses built on the east side of Centennial Avenue. The land between Lincoln Park West and Lincoln Park East is now the Kaltenbach estate. The 1929 map (sheets 5 & 6) shows two new houses on the east side of Centennial Avenue. Even by this late date, *none* of the lots on the east side of Lincoln Park East have been built on.

While no written record of anti-German feeling directed against Droescher could be found, the very slow growth of "Lincoln Park" is suspicious. Economic conditions would seem not to account for this slow growth. Until the "Black Tuesday" stock market crash October 29, 1929, these were the "Roaring Twenties". Fridlington and Fuhro appear to have correctly identified the cause of "Lincoln Park's" slow growth.

As the Great Depression began to unfold (1930), Cranford's population stood at 11,126.

#### What Remains of "Lincoln Park" Today?

In a word, very little. The concrete base of the entrance gates on Lincoln Park East still stand behind a bus stop on South Avenue, but all the wonderful walls and scenic structures along the river have crumbled into disuse. Here's a photo of the footbridge in 1912 and what remains today.



*Footbridge 1912*



*Footbridge 2015*

The Kaltenbach mansion itself still stands as Cranford Hall Nursing Home, but the rest of its grounds no longer exist as such. Mr. Kaltenbach's silk empire began to collapse as rayon came into popular use, vastly under pricing silk. The unfolding Great Depression further depressed his wealth, and in 1931 he died of a heart attack. His wife and daughter tried to run the mansion as a prestigious guest house, but unpaid taxes plus interest on them piled up. In 1938 the Township seized the property, and "Greystone" became a convalescent home, then ultimately Cranford Hall. Between 1939 and 1942, the Township sold off the rest of the grounds to various developers who built garden apartments on them. The northern end of Centennial Avenue above Cummins Street hosts twin residences (six pairs on the east side and ten pairs on the west side), not the single family



dwellings Droescher planned. Only Burchfield Avenue hosts mostly the lovely 1920's single family dwellings that Droescher had envisioned populating all of "Lincoln Park". Thomas Avenue hosts a mix of period-correct and later dwellings. Surely "Lincoln Park" was a grand dream forestalled.

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8. Lincoln Park Cranford, New Jersey, (promotional brochure), S. R. Droescher, Cranford, NJ, 1912
9. Sanborn Fire Maps 1915(Sheet 9), 1922 (Sheets 5 & 6), 1929(Sheets 5 & 6)
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11. Strazdon, Maureen, "Know Your Neighbor(hood)", presentation at Cranford Public Library, April 14, 2014