

# The Oak Hill Community – A Brief History

by Historian Randall Gabrielan 5/4/2015

Oak Hill, while created in the late 1950s-1960s as Middletown Township's last large neighborhood, has a historical antecedent, Nut Swamp, a name that originated at least by 1678. The place name, believed to have Native American origins, was prominent on the first large sheet map of New Jersey, published by Faden in 1777. Nut Swamp's identity as a village is evidenced by its 19<sup>th</sup> century public facilities, the Nut Swamp School, (Little Red Schoolhouse) an 1840 extant structure, the former Micheau store which once stood on the northwest corner of Middletown-Lincroft and Dwight Roads and the apple cider press/distillery earlier on the northwest corner of Middletown-Lincroft and Bamm Hollow Roads. While historic Nut Swamp was a vast expanse of central-southern Middletown Township, contemporary Oak Hill is defined by carefully circumscribed borders. A second locality also has historical ties to Oak Hill, Morrisville, renamed Everett, which is centered at the end of Sunnyside Road.

The Oak Hill neighborhood began in the latter 1950s when Jacob R. V. M Lefferts Jr. opened tract Oak Tree Farm No. 1. The name of his construction company, Oak Hill Builders, likely originated from the closer of two Middletown Township estates named Oak Hill.

Elnathan Field's home and nursery were located on the northeast corner of Middletown-Lincroft and Oak Hill Roads, cater-corner to the edge of Lefferts' Oak Tree Farm No. 1 and within sight of Lefferts' first house. Field's Oak Hill Nurseries, which extended some distance east and north of the aforementioned intersection, was large, productive and well-known in the horticultural world in his time.

J. Amory Haskell assembled the second Oak Hill, an extensive gentleman's farm begun in 1907 and located in the township's Navesink River region, north of Cooper Road. Depicted on period maps, Haskell's Oak Hill distance from the Oak Hill neighborhood is evidence that his estate is an unrelated entity.

The Lefferts family, settled by 1660 on western Long Island in today's Brooklyn, was one of that region's wealthiest and historically significant. Jacob started in Monmouth County with Lake Lefferts Estates in Matawan. Begun prior to World War II and completed after the war, it consisted largely of 1,100 square-foot ranch houses. He later built Applebrook in the 1950s on the former Hamiltonian Farm, a Fairview, Middletown development which ran south of Highway 35. Post-World War II construction was often characterized by modest buildings of repetitive design erected on small lots along grid-pattern streets. Lefferts enhanced Applebrook typically with ranch style, larger, one car garage houses placed on curved streets. As he progressed to Oak Hill, Lefferts planned still larger and higher quality houses. In order to enhance neighborhood aesthetics, they would be built on streets laid-out following the area's topography. The success of Oak Hill stemmed from these characteristics of size, house substance and skillful use of the land. *He aimed to have the area known as a community, not a development.*

The survey of Oak Hill began in early 1956 in sections that were planned to open sequentially. The map of Section One filed that June ran along Bamm Hollow Road from Middletown- Lincroft to Pelican Road. The first house, which served as the model, was erected at 2 Bamm Hollow Road. Section Two, which ran from Mallard Road to Crane Court, was filed in August, 1958. Kingfisher Drive was the southern boundary for each.

Lefferts employed fine architects. The first, Harsen and Johns, was headquartered in Tenafly, prior to opening a Red Bank office when Noboru Kobayashi joined. Kobayashi designed extensively for Oak Tree Farm No. 1 and No. 2. After he left the firm, he built an acclaimed practice, renowned in the domestic sphere. Kobayashi worked for Lefferts until the mid-1960s when Thomas Smith of Rumson became Lefferts' architect of choice. Lefferts' aspirations for quality and innovation brought a number of awards and a location of choice for innovative housing. Examination of the Oak Hill awards and distinctive houses help illustrate the value Lefferts created.

*Good Housekeeping* requested Lefferts to build planned their "House of Ideas," a choice that stemmed from the publication's belief that "the average family gets the most house for its money from a first-rate builder." Designed by Kobayashi and erected at 2001 Middletown-Lincroft Road, the home included a private apartment adjacent to the garage. Specially decorated to serve as a show place, the house received a national audience when published with a sixteen page spread in their September, 1958 issue. The house's acclaim included mention in *House and Home* magazine as "the most highly publicized home in the history of the building industry." Reynolds Metals Company joined with Oak Hill Builders to erect in 1959 the "House of Ease" at 9 Oriole Road. This home featured extensive and innovative use of aluminum as a means for reducing long-term maintenance.

Lefferts desired a design from a nationally prominent architect, his motivation to hire of Royal Barry Mills of Boston, a contact likely made by a referral from *Good Housekeeping*. Mills designed the distinctive 10 Wren Court which received a *House and Home* Award of Merit in residential design and construction. The National Association of Home Builders awarded Oak Hill a citation for "outstanding neighborhood planning and residential design and construction."

The growing demand for larger houses with more amenities was fueled by both evolving zoning requirements that required larger lot size and greater buyer expectations. In 1963, Lefferts built two houses on Townsend Drive in anticipation of the next year's New Jersey Tercentenary and the New York World's Fair. At number 65 Kobayashi planned a large colonial-inspired design, the Tercentenary Home to honor New Jersey on its 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary. At number 80, Emil A. Schmidlin designed the World's Fair House, an all-electric home sponsored by the Formica Company. Its extensive use of Formica was promoted as an ease to household drudgery, while four skylights brightened the indoor atmosphere. The house was planned to serve as a research and testing facility for new building techniques and products prior to their use the next year as Lefferts' planning vision and Oak Hill's early honors were heralded in his promotions. The neighborhood was advertized as "an award-winning community." In 1967 he published a pamphlet *The Prudent Man's Guide to Home Buying* to reinforce the significance the buyer

should place in the quality of the neighborhood and the likelihood of a given area's maintaining that quality over time.

Other builders made smaller additions to Lefferts that readily fit with and became part of Oak Hill. Fox Run was the first significant development at Oak Hill by builders other than Lefferts. This four block tract for forty-five homes was located on a small part of the extensive Wallace Grove estate. It was named *Tall Trees* by the prior owner Charles Gibson Bennett who had been married to the former Susanna P. Hartshorne prior to his premature death. Located on the north side of Bamm Hollow Road opposite the division of Oak Tree Farm Nos. 1 and 2, Fox Run was built by David Shane and Marvin Stoloff. A then-tentative nature of the Oak Hill boundaries is inferred from a 1961 Fox Run advertisement for "Middletown's most exclusive community overlooking Oak Hill." In 1959 the nine lot Hillyer Acres was built at the eastern end of Bamm Hollow Road, on a former cul-de-sac that expanded to a circular drive in the 1970s. Lefferts expanded his operation as time, sales and demand afforded the opportunities. Ownership of extensive tracts left him at times with an abundant supply of lots which he traded or used to pay others. A second builder, Harold Harrison, erected a number of houses in the early period. His architect was Edward Wurth, Jr., of Newark, Harrison's father-in-law whose typical design was a bi-level.

Later sections of Oak Hill opened as sales afforded the opportunity. The section surrounding Borden and Crawford Roads, known as "The Glen," was planned to fit the generally level topography there. In the 1970s, a section of Hillside filled-in north of Dwight Road, while Williamsburg Estates was erected west of Fox Run.

The construction of the Garden State Parkway altered the southern boundary of the future Oak Hill as the new road bisected the former western end of Nut Swamp Road which was named Dwight Road east of the Parkway, while a short stem became a dead-end street known as West Nut Swamp Road. Access to the neighborhood in its early years was via Exit 109 as there was no Exit 114 when Oak Hill was begun. While use of 109 required a back-track through Lincroft for travelers going south, residents appeared satisfied with Oak Hill's isolation. Indeed, many expressed alarm when plans to construct Exit 114 were announced. Scheduled to open January 1, 1963 Oak Hill residents feared drivers would use local streets as a cut-through to other destinations. Excessive noise and safety concerns were foremost. As a consequence, neighbors united to form a community voice to agitate against the new exit and on March 22, 1962 organized the Oak Hill Association.

Perhaps as a surprise to its opponents the new Parkway exit provided a convenience to Oak Hill residents, access that many now deem a necessity. In addition, Exit 114 also facilitated the construction of Deepdale, a development of approximately seventy-seven lots which backed-up on the rear of the Kingfisher Drive properties in Oak Tree Farm No. 2. Lefferts continued here his practice of building larger, costlier houses. Other builders have continued the practice on tracts adjacent to the original Oak Hill.

Lefferts based his plans for a high-quality community of enduring value by building better houses on well-designed tracts. The perspective of time has redeemed his vision and aspirations.