

Overbrook Farms

National Register Nomination—Statement of Significance

prepared by Edith L. Willoughby and others

Overbrook Farms Roughly bounded by City Avenue , 58th Street , Woodbine Avenue , and 66th Street

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places
March 21, 1985

Description:

Overbrook Farms, as an example of late 19th and early 20th century suburban residential development, has remained remarkably intact considering its location within the boundaries of Philadelphia . Its creation, starting in 1893, was a result of the combined forces of planned expansion of commuter suburbs along the rails of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the immense wealth generated by the industrial growth and prosperity in Philadelphia after the Civil War.

The community of Overbrook Farms is situated on 168 acres at one of the highest elevations in the city of Philadelphia . The rectangular form of the development is bisected into north and south segments by the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Diagonally crossing in an east-west line is Lancaster Pike, which was a toll road until 1917. Cresting the area to the south is Morris Park and to the west is City Avenue (U.S. Route 1). For some part of its east boundary the community meets with the expansive grounds of Overbrook School for the Blind, which dates from 1897.

The eclecticism that permeated the turn-of-the-century architecture is conspicuously evident in Overbrook Farms. The early area of development demonstrates the late 19th century penchant for the Italianate and also the rich ornamentation and variation of the Ruskinian theory of architecture. With the progression of the development into the 20th century, the emphasis of the architecture was to the Revivals. South of 64th Street , the latest area of development is set with houses that reflect this trend. Remarkably, the architecture of the homes has retained its original form.

Residential and commercial buildings in Overbrook Farms can be classified as representative of a vari-

ety of architectural styles including Colonial Revival, Tudor Revival, Gothic Revival, Arts and Crafts, Queen Anne, Italian Villa and Federal Revival. With few exceptions, all of the 413 structures in Overbrook Farms are three stories with primary building materials of stone, Pompeian brick and stucco over brick. Most of the buildings have one or more architectural elements of decoration, including limestone carvings, quoining, gargoyles, columns, tracery windows and leaded and stained glass.

A survey of Philadelphia building permits indicates that detached houses built in Overbrook Farms are in excess of 2000 square feet per floor and construction costs were between \$12,000 and \$25,000, with a few upwards of \$35,000. For a semidetached house, construction cost was averaged at \$8,500.

Like the residential structures in the district, the Overbrook Farms commercial buildings are located along 63rd Street near the railroad station. The first commercial building, built in 1894, is a Pompeian brick Italianate-style structure. Its commercial usage is still maintained. A subsequent commercial building, designed by Horace Trumbauer in 1895, housed a pharmacy. The Flemish bond and massive gambrel-roofed structure incorporates an addition dating from 1906, according to the city building permits. The railroad station, of cottage design with lacey brackets, predates Overbrook Farms, having been built in 1858. The station, a major stimulus to the initial development, remains an important factor in the community's popularity. At 6063 Drexel Road is the building designed in 1897 for Miss Sayward's School. This handsome Tudor structure is used now for educational purposes by the Yeshiva Talmudical. The developers constructed a two-story building with a circular tower and neo-Romanesque arch over the main entrance at 6092 Drexel Road . It housed their offices and contained samples of interior appointments available to prospective purchasers. It is now a private residence.

Three churches of major denominations were built in Overbrook Farms on the principal thoroughfare, Lancaster Pike. Overbrook Presbyterian Church, a Gothic-style structure designed by Addison Hutton,

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was built in 1890 on land given by Wistar Morris at the corner of Lancaster Pike and City Line Avenue . Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church is an 1894 Gothic-revival design by Thomas P. Lonsdale and built on land given by the developers. Finally, the Memorial Church of St. Paul, an Episcopal church designed by Frederick Mann, was built in 1899. The building is an English decorated Gothic parish church built on land purchased by the congregation.

Significant to the era, but no longer being used as was intended, is the Overbrook Farms Steam Heat Plant. Built in 1893 of stone, the plant provided heat to all the buildings in the district from its location on the southwest corner of Upland Way and Woodbine Avenue until 1973. The building is presently vacant. The safe pure water from underground springs was forced into a water tower that stands in the 5800 block of Woodbine Avenue . It was used until the area was joined with the city water system in the 1920s.

The streets of Overbrook Farms are not laid out in a strictly grid fashion, since the tracks of the Pennsylvania main line bisect the community. The streets are gently graded and curved and are 40-50 feet wide. They have granite curbs and cement sidewalks. The streets and thoroughfares of the district assume the same manner of use for which they were intended. With major traffic arteries circling the area and an absence of signal lights, the roadways bear little foreign traffic and this has helped maintain the integrity of the district.

Vegetation was removed as necessary during the construction, but whenever possible trees were left standing. There were heavily wooded areas in Overbrook Farms. The location of the forested areas can easily be located by the stately old trees still standing. Still remaining are Victorian whimsies that include rookeries, pools and stone walls. Greenhouses were part of the development and some are still found in the development.

Architectural landscaping made abundant use of the traditional Pennsylvania trees and plantings

such as rhododendrons, japonica, mountain laurel, holly, azaleas, ferns and ivy. In addition, the more exotic ornamental plantings include weeping cherry trees and Oriental maples. The sweeping lawns, abundant trees and ornamental vegetation create an unsurpassed setting.

Most of the homes in Overbrook Farms are in good to excellent condition with resident-owners who actively maintain them. Examination of Philadelphia building records indicate that additions and alterations occurred during the period of significance and included wings for billiard rooms, libraries and the glazing of porches. With the advent of the automobile, garages with living quarters and underground gasoline reservoirs were built. The garages were commissioned to the same architects that designed the residences and were built of the same materials and detailed to match the house.

Of the 413 buildings in the district, 36 are noncontributing. All but two are intrusions because of their age (after 1934). The two remaining have been modified-obscuring their original shape and size. On compilation, the district shows a contributing figure of 91.3 per cent and noncontributing of 8.7 per cent.

Overbrook Farms provides for the community a heritage in the artistic attributes of its architecture and a show piece of stability and tradition.

For Philadelphia, the most important contribution is in the difference Overbrook Farms imbues with its architectural styling—an area of houses that can be justifiably deemed important pieces of architectural styling, a useful insight into the period in which it was built and an asset to the city.

For history, Overbrook Farms remains an enduring example of the suburbs created when the railroad was king.

Statement of Significance:

Overbrook Farms is significant in its role as an example of late 19th and early 20th century suburban development. Its significance is further distin-

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guished by its varied and commodious architectural styling in a pastoral setting encompassing its private residences, churches and commercial buildings. This planned community was designed with the implementation of a commercial area, immediately adjacent to the existing Overbrook train station, which contained shops, educational facilities and religious institutions. The selective, but inclusive planning was intended to be sensitive to the needs of the prospective residents, many of whom would be relocating from the center urban area of Philadelphia, east of the Schuylkill River.

Prior to the development of Overbrook Farms the Overbrook train station had long been serving the needs of the local populace. The stop dates from 1840 on the Columbia Railroad system and was originally a flag station. The present station house was built in 1858 and served the local farmers and estate owners whose land straddled both sides of the city line boundary. Gentlemen farmers like Captain Alfred Pleasanton, Wistar Morris and John M. George as well as future president of the Pennsylvania Railroad Frank Thompson and the Godey family ("Godey's Lady's Book",) were being serviced by the station. Students at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary gained access to both the city and Villanova by train. In the years before the development of commuter enclaves along this line of the Pennsylvania Railroad system the summer hotel and boarding house trade at Overbrook's Mrs. Wannamacher's and beyond all travelled to or through Overbrook station.

Railroad companies at the turn of the century saw the commuter system to the suburbs as a potential way to build capital. If communities were built along the line, commuters would use the trains to travel back and forth to the city to work. When George Roberts was the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad (1880-97) suburbanization began in earnest.

Land was purchased near stations along the main line and executives of the railroad were expected to live there. One such tract of land purchased for development was the John M. George farm at

Overbrook. George, a wealthy Quaker farmer whose land was in the George family since 1693 (having been purchased from the First Welsh Company who had purchased it from William Penn in 1681) had remanded the proceeds of the sale to the George School in Newton, Bucks County.

Drexel & Co., a large banking and investment firm with holdings in the Pennsylvania Railroad purchased tracts of land along the main line of the rail system beginning in 1880. These sites were at Overbrook, Wynnewood, Wayne and St. Davids. These locations were to be a chain of expanding affluent suburban communities.

An impressive list of architects, some of whom would become nationally known and respected after their work in Overbrook Farms were commissioned by Drexel & Co. to design all residential and non-residential buildings. Concomitantly, this same group was working in Pelham on the Chestnut Hill spur of the Pennsylvania Railroad for Drexel & Co.

Relative to the other undertakings along the rail system by Drexel & Co., Overbrook Farms was the largest and most ambitious endeavor. An announcement for the development in 1893 proposed 500 homes. The "new town" concept advertised was indeed accomplished in Overbrook Farms. From its inception, residential, commercial, educational and religious facilities were developed for the residents. An advertising brochure described Overbrook Farms as a "suburb deluxe."

Historically situated on the western edge of Philadelphia in William Penn's Liberty Lands, Overbrook Farms is located between 58th and 66th Streets and between Woodbine and City Line Avenues on 168 acres of farm land purchased in 1893 from the John M. George estate for the sum of \$425,000. Two prominent developers, Herman Wendell and Walter Bassett Smith, were contracted by Drexel & Co. to commence with the planning and development of a model commuter suburb at Overbrook Farms. The developers intended to attract a specific class of resident. Extensive advertising extolled the virtues of leaving the urban area for the health-

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giving tranquility of the suburbs. The move to the new suburbs was discussed at length in the family and women's magazines of the time. Magazines such as "The American Home," "Country-side Magazine," "Good Housekeeping" and "Suburban Life" continuously ran articles about the benefits of country-suburban living. The developers offered inviting amenities such as sparkling water from underground springs, a central steam-heat plant, indoor and outdoor electric lighting and elegant homes that a client could customize.

Home sites presented a variety of styles to guard against monotony, but were equal in stature and presence to insure stability to a socioeconomic norm. The works of Goforth and Yarnell, Charles Barton Kean, Westray Ladd, Walter H. Thomas, Walter F. Price, Horace Trumbauer, Chester Kirk, William L. Price, David Knickerbocker Boyd, Lawrence Visher Boyd, Joseph W. Houston, Angus Wade and others are distributed throughout the community significantly sensitive to form, texture and color with an enduring sense of originality. Their work in Overbrook Farms was noted in architectural journals such as "American Architect and Building News" and in many editions of "Scientific American Builders Edition."

The developmental success of Overbrook Farms was closely aligned with the rise of the level of finance and technology in Philadelphia. The immense wealth accumulated by the principals in the industries of steel, coal and gas fostered the populating of the community of Overbrook Farms as was intended by its developers. Major Luther S. Bent, vice-president of Pennsylvania Steel, lived in the first residence constructed. Other industrialists of record were Frederick McOwen, owner of Berwind White Coal Company and Clarence Geist of United Gas Improvement Company. All of the industries that gave Philadelphia perhaps its finest hour were represented in Overbrook Farms by either their owners or top-level executives. Dr. Alfred Coombs Barnes was a resident of Overbrook Farms as well as pioneer radiologist Dr. George Edward Phaler. Philadelphia Mayor John Weaver and Governors Edwin Stuart and Robert E. Pattison all called Over-

brook Farms home. According to the United States census of 1900, the occupational breakdown of the area showed that 26 per cent of the heads of household held professional occupations (doctors or lawyers) and 43 per cent of the heads of household were administrative executives (company owners, corporate officials or rate executives). It is known from the city directories of 1900 that 94 per cent, of employed heads of household in Overbrook Farms travelled outside the area to work. This information substantiates the goals of the developers.

Precedents and parallels may be cited from Wendell and Smith's earlier developments at North Wayne and simultaneous work at Pelham (also in Philadelphia). Like these counterparts of Overbrook Farms, the encompassed architectural contribution retains its significance. Further, in the example of Overbrook Farms, the contemporary use of the district remains commensurate with the original planning of the developers. Overbrook Farms has suffered few intrusions and subsequent building has not altered either the size or ambiance of the district, with its geography and boundaries allowing it to remain a definable community within the boundaries of Philadelphia. The area's southern boundary is immediately adjacent to a dense wilderness park, part of the Fairmount Park system. City Line Avenue (U.S. Route 1), Overbrook School for the Blind and its adjacent neo-Tudor row homes of Pleasanton Farms complete the isolation of Overbrook Farms from the main of Philadelphia density. The formulation of the Overbrook Farms historic district as an exemplar of a planned turn-of-the-century railroad suburb incorporating outstanding architectural styling, has been encouraged by the Overbrook Farms Club, the oldest civic association in Philadelphia. The architectural significance has also been recognized by the Philadelphia Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians.