

Discussion on the history of the Norwell Homes area

Thank you so much to Marybeth and Peter Shea for hosting us in your beautiful—and I would say historic—home! We are gathering today at the “John & Lillian Evans House,” built in 1953. The Evans bought this home for \$10,098 directly from the Norwell Homes developers: Paul Gerardi and Franklin Fahnley. The Sheas are the seventh owners. I’ll talk about the Norwell Homes development and how it came to be later, but first I’d like to give everyone a brief history of this area we now call Norwell and a little history of the West End of town, specifically.

For thousands of years, the land that makes up what is today Norwell was inhabited by indigenous people. These natives grew crops, foraged, hunted, and fished... mostly in the Assinippi and the North River areas. Around 1617, there was a major outbreak of disease from European settlers, and it decimated an estimated 90% of the native population in New England, including the Massachusett and the Wompanoag tribes that inhabited this specific area. There are still descendants of these original inhabitants who live on the South Shore today. Now they are known as the Mattakeesett Tribe of the Massachusett Indian Nation, the Massachusett Tribe at Ponkapoag, and the Mashpee Wompanoag Tribe. If you go to the Historical Society website, you can find links to these tribes’ websites under “A Brief History of Norwell” and the “Learn More” tab.

In the 1640s, Europeans who were living around Scituate harbor came up the North River to settle in what is today Norwell’s Church Hill area. Among the first were Robert and Honour Stetson, who purchased (and were later granted) land on the North River. The Stetsons were among the original “Men of Kent” who settled in Scituate Harbor after originally arriving in Plymouth from Kent, England. While most of the other Scituate residents stayed in the harbor area, the Stetsons decided to make their fortune “up river” in Norwell, and they are the first known European settlers in this area.

The Town of Scituate was officially incorporated in 1636—soon after the Stetsons came up the river. At that time the boundaries of Scituate were much larger and included all of Norwell, parts of Hanover, and parts of Marshfield.

What we know today as the Town of Norwell broke off from Scituate in 1849 and established itself as South Scituate. There are many theories as to why we separated from Scituate, but the prevailing belief is that the interests of the “inlanders” varied greatly from those of the “coast dwellers”—the primary difference being how to manage the town’s money.

About 40 years later, in 1888, the town was again renamed—after Boston businessman, South Scituate Savings Bank president, and summer resident Henry Norwell. Mr. Norwell pledged \$2,500/year for 10 years to the town for road maintenance. When a vote was taken in 1888 on a new town name, “Norwell” won hands-down.

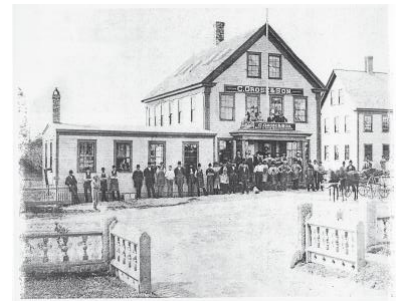
Now on to the history of this area in particular. The West End of Norwell is often referred to as “Ridge Hill,” which we typically define as the area between Assinippi and Queen Anne’s Corner—specifically including the High Street area. Norwell Homes was built between Ridge Hill and Valley Swamp, which is on both sides of Grove Street further up towards Prospect Street.

The first settler on Ridge Hill was Benjamin Farrow (the family later went by the name Farrar), who built a Cape Cod-style house in 1720 on Washington Street (near what is today 263 Washington Street—the strip mall with the Tease Hair Boutique). The original Farrow home was destroyed by fire in the mid-1970s.

What made Ridge Hill so unique among Norwell neighborhoods was that it developed a very tight-knit neighborhood society separate from the rest of the town—mostly because of its geographical isolation from the earliest settlements. Grove Street (from Route 53 up to School Street) was only a footpath through Valley Swamp until 1854. Ridge Hill residents worked, shopped, and attended social events in Ridge Hill—or in Rockland or Hanover—not in today's Norwell Center. To get to Norwell center, one had to go down today's Route 53 and up today's Route 123.



For most of the 1700s and early 1800s, farming was the main industry in town. But the economic depression of the mid-1850s, followed by the Civil War, brought about a need for employment other than farming; and the West End, with its easy access to Queen Anne's Corner and Hanover, was an ideal location for new businesses. Norwell was a hub of shoemaking and in 1855 a third of the working people in the town were either in shoemaking or working in a related industry like tack manufacturing or box manufacturing. The Grose Shoe Factory on High Street was a major employer in town.



Originally shoes were made by individuals for themselves and their families, but increasingly in the 1800s, shoe making became more specialized and small shoe shops, often referred to as "10 x 10's" (due to their typical dimensions) were built. The shoe shop of David Robinson (who was a well-known shoe and boot maker) sits on the property in front of Cole School and is the only "10x10" shoe shop still standing in Norwell today.

Back to the creation of Grove Street, as I said it wasn't until 1854 that Grove Street (known at the time as "Valley Swamp Road") became a passable road for horses and carriages. Its creation enabled Ridge Hill residents to travel more easily to Norwell Center, but the road had no houses on it even on the 1879 map and the 1903.

Grove Street was created in 1855 when the town hired Charles Simmons (who lived on the other side of Valley Swamp on what is today the "Hingham side" of Prospect Street) to cut the road. The Historical Society happens to have transcriptions of Charles Simmons' diaries from

the mid-1800s, and in them he proudly refers to himself as “Surveyor of Roads.” The diaries speak to a simple farming life in a small town. Some of my favorite entries are these:

- Dec. 2, 1843 “killed my beef, weighed 443 lbs”
- Dec. 12 “killed the hog”. Dec. 13 “salted it”
- Oct. 30, 1853 “put on my draws”
- June 4, 1856 “pulled off my draws.”



These entries occur and recur, year by year, and Farmer Simmons never varies much from putting on his red flannels about Nov. 1 and removing them about June 10, or sometimes even a little later.

The Ridge Hill area also has an abundance of Civil War history—some of it yet to be uncovered—and Society Archivist Janet Watson and Board member Alan Prouty are diligently working on some of that research. The Civil War monument in Norwell Center lists 24 soldiers and sailors who died in that war and 6 of them were Ridge Hill residents. Many more West End residents served and survived the war, and the Society has a free brochure that is a driving tour of some Civil War sites in town—many of which are in this area.

Ridge Hill was also home to several large poultry farms and plucking houses, including the Farrar Poultry Farm (where the Brantwood development is today) and the Curtis Poultry Farm (near Farrar Farm Road today). Former Ridge Hill resident and author Carol Meshau once said that during funerals at the Washington Street cemetery, there were times when feathers rained down on the mourners like snow!

In the 1880's, the Hanover Street Railway was built between Ridge Hill and the towns of Abington, Brockton, and Hanover. Yes, there were trolleys in Norwell that ran down High Street! While the trolleys were meant to ease the commute for men employed in the shoe factories, they also allowed families from Ridge Hill to access downtown Rockland (which was a hub of weekend social activities!) and Nantasket Beach in the summer, and they ran from 1893 to 1921.



Norwell has always been a proudly conservative town with a strong “less-government” attitude. One of our country’s most beloved presidents, Franklin Roosevelt, lost handily in Norwell in all four of his presidential races. I mention this fact because it is with that information in the back of your minds that I explain how zoning laws evolved in Norwell and how Norwell Homes was able to developed, despite the smaller-than-usual lot sizes typically seen in our town.

In 1940, the Norwell Town Moderator appointed a Zoning Committee to “bring to the next Annual Town Meeting suggestions as to building or zoning laws.” Zoning laws were just being introduced throughout Massachusetts and some adjacent towns had recently enacted them. One year after the Zoning Committee first met, the 1941 Town Report notes (somewhat comically!) “Public opinion shows clearly that there is not a widespread understanding of Town planning and that there is undoubtedly considerable opposition” to zoning laws. The following year, in 1942, an initial stab at basic zoning (outlining business and residential districts, mostly) was presented to Town Meeting, and it passed. Over the course of the next decade, small changes were made to the zoning laws, but nothing of significance.

Then came Norwell Homes.

The idea for this development began when Albert R. Schofield of Weymouth purchased multiple parcels of land from various Norwell residents in 1951. Schofield is listed as the proprietor of a “Real Estate Concern” in the 1950 U.S. census. He was able to sell all the land he acquired to Paul Gerardi and Franklin Fahnley and in 1951, they had an engineering firm in Hingham officially draw up plans for a development called Norwell Homes. I have a newspaper photo of the two gentlemen—MB please pass that out.

Construction began right away and, as I mentioned earlier, this house was built in 1953—two years after the original plan was developed. Norwell Homes attracted young families to town, veterans who could take advantage of the low-interest VA loans, and people who might not be interested in acres and acres of lawns and gardens. Smaller lots translated to smaller mortgages, and this development sold out quickly.

The first owners of this home, John and Lillian Evans, didn’t stay long in the house—just five years—and in 1958 they sold the home to Alfred and Theresa Bulman of Jamaica Plain. Alfred Bulman had been a Private First Class in the Army in Korea, and the Bulmans qualified for a low-interest VA loan.

Interestingly enough, “Government-hands-off” Norwell residents quickly changed their minds about zoning laws when they saw the smaller lots on which the Norwell Homes houses were built. In 1955 (only four years after Norwell Homes began), zoning in Norwell was amended at Town Meeting to ½ acre and 1-acre zoning, except if the deed was created prior to April 10, 1952 (which included both Norwell Homes and the Brantwood development). Clearly residents wanted to try to maintain the more rural look that larger house lots afforded. Interestingly, the 1955 Norwell Town Report notes a Zoning Board hearing with Fahnley and Gerardi where they... “request permission to build on lots in the rear of the Norwell Homes Development with less than the required area.” Permission was denied.

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An early advertisement for Norwell Homes notes the house prices begin at \$9,780. The homes featured “Youngstown Kitchens”, Norge Ranges, tile baths, and (questionably...) 478 cubic feet of closet



space and 100 square feet of “playroom area.” Please note the cubic feet in the closet space—in other words, you can pile things really high! We believe the playroom area had to be the basement!

It’s easy to drive down Main Street and River Street in Norwell and see homes that are centuries old and think that fully represents our town’s history. Please do appreciate those houses—there are many well-preserved examples of homes from the 1700s and 1800s, and they’re very important to the character of our town.

Years ago when I was on the Norwell Historical Commission (which is the Town board that regulates historic structures), there was a demolition discussion about a small cottage (and I’m being generous referring to it that way...) that used to stand at the entrance to Norwell on Main Street. I remember telling my fellow Commissioners at the time that not every home was built to last generations—quick, cheap construction sometimes happened 100 years ago.

Norwell Homes houses ARE built to last generations. These homes are quality construction that (as the original ads touted) were intended to be “expandable.” Mr. Fahnley and Mr. Gerardi were excellent builders, and their homes age well.

So maybe you don’t live in a two-hundred-year-old home. But remember—history happens every day. Our meeting here tonight might be discussed and researched a hundred years from now by future Norwell historians. The Norwell Homes development is a perfect snapshot of an era in history where post-war citizens wanted to put down roots, and it provided reasonably-sized homes for Vets, for young families, and for those people who were slightly daunted by acres and acres of land to care for.

Norwell Homes IS Norwell’s 20th century history.

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