

The Emergence of "the West Fields"

Westfield was part of Elizabethtown from the time it was settled in late 1664 until 1794, when the Township of Westfield was created. The triangle west of the Rahway River and southeast of the Watchung Mountains was hardwood forest in its native state.

The area surveyed stretched from what is today called Union south roughly along the Rahway River to the Middlesex County line, skirted Rahway and proceeded west along the county line to include what later became Plainfield before turning northeast along the base of First Mountain.

There were conflicts between the East Jersey Proprietors and the Elizabethtown Associates over who owned this land. These conflicts became more frequent and more heated after "the Clinker Lot Division," in which the Associates laid out the area in 171 one-hundred-acre lots. This survey was conducted between Dec. 26, 1699 and March 5, 1700 (also 1699 by the old calendar.)

The disputes were complicated by certain land transactions of 1684 following a survey of the western bounds of Elizabethtown ordered by Governor Gawen Lawrie. The survey was led by Captain John Baker, the Indian interpreter, who later was "slapped on the wrist" by a court for his role in the questionable proceedings. With little documentary support, the so-called "Baker Tract" has sometimes been referred to as the beginning of Westfield.

The Proprietors were influential British investors, including many Quakers, who purchased shares of East Jersey from Lord Berkeley and Sir George Carteret. These two men had been granted New Jersey by the Duke of York, who had received it from his brother, King Charles II.

The families of the Elizabethtown Associates were less likely to be model subjects of the King and more likely to have been in sympathy with Cromwell and the Roundheads in Britain's great Civil War. Poor yet ambitious, they came to New England and later helped settle eastern Long Island under Dutch rule.

Some of them were negotiating with the Dutch to purchase the area west of Staten Island when the Duke's fleet forced the surrender of New Netherlands. Wasting no time, the restless Long Islanders obtained the approval of the new English governor, Richard Nicoll, for their purchase of the Elizabethtown area from three Leni Lenape chieftains.

Unknown to anyone on this side of the Atlantic, the Duke had given New Jersey to his royalist friends, Carteret and Berkeley, after Nicolls had set sail. Trans-Atlantic communications being as slow as they were in the 17th century, Nicholl, the Duke's legal agent, thus ceded land which the Duke no longer owned. This resulted in a protracted legal struggle over land rights between the Long Islanders, who banded together as the Elizabethtown Associates, on one hand and the East Jersey Proprietors (Berkeley, Carteret and their successors), on the other hand.

The conflict never was fully settled in court, but as a practical matter, the stubborn Associates generally prevailed by being more aggressive, numerous - and in possession of the land.

Today you can see a living legacy of the clash between the Proprietors and the Associates in the street patterns of south-central Plainfield. It is here that the northeast-to-southwest property-line orientation of the Associates (parallel to the Watchung Mountains) meets up with (and hence must be reconciled with) the north-to-south orientation of the East Jersey Proprietors.

The sector of the city where the Proprietary survey has prevailed is bounded by the Middlesex County line on the south and Woodland Ave. on the east. The triangle between Woodland Avenue, Seventh Street and the county line is the transition zone. The reconciliation between the two ancient surveys may be discerned by noting the curvature of Park, Plainfield and Grant avenues and streets in between by as much as 45 degrees. In miniature, Crescent Avenue symbolizes the reconciliation.

Elizabethtown historian Edwin Hatfield, writing in 1868, dated the settlement of Westfield with the Clinker Lot Division. "Almost immediately, emigrants from the older parts of the town (Elizabeth) began to set towards the interior," he wrote.

The Rev. James Huntting, pastor of the Westfield Presbyterian Church, wrote in 1839 that Westfield parish was settled about the year 1720. He listed these families among the early settlers: Acken, Badgley, Baker, Brooks, Bryant, Clark, Connet, Cory, Craig, Crane, Davis, Denman, Dunham, Frazee, Frost,

Hendricks, Hetfield, High, Hinds (Haines), Hole, Jennings (Gennings), Lambert, Littell, Ludlum (Ludlow), Marsh, Meeker, Miller, Mills, Pierson, Robinson, Ross, Scudder, Spinnage (Spinning), Terry, Tucker, Willcox, Williams, Woodruff and Yeomans.

Certainly not all of these families were here by 1750, however, and the name French should be added, though they tarried across the line in Springfield until later in the 18th century. The influential Downer family arrived from Elizabethtown during the Revolution.

Both Huntting and Hatfield felt that by 1720 there were enough settlers in the "west fields of Elizabethtown" for it to be considered a distinct settlement. The two decades following the 1699/1700 survey was ample time for those hardy pioneers to clear some productive fields from the hardwood forest. By 1741 the newly organized Borough of Elizabeth included three western wards: Westfield, Rahway and Springfield.

(Based on a copyrighted column by Ralph H. Jones published in the Westfield Leader in 1990.)

(This information has been compiled and edited by John R. Panosh from original documents supplied by Ralph H. Jones, Curator, Westfield Historical Society Museum and Archives.)

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