

**The Birth of a Town:
Westfield, New Jersey
1900-1903***

by
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In Union County, New Jersey, there are eight townships¹, seven boroughs², five cities³ -- and just one town, the Town of Westfield. How did Westfield become a "town"? Who made that choice, and why? And what were the consequences of that decision?

The people who live in Westfield today, by and large, give absolutely no thought to this issue. We accept, without question, that Westfield is a town -- as if that fact were an immutable law of physics or nature. But it is not. In the early 20th Century, the citizens of Westfield vigorously debated not only their form of government but also their community's municipal character. That debate, and its broader implications, are the subjects of this brief paper.

I. BACKGROUND

The "West Fields of Elizabeth Town" were laid out in 1699 when the land within the Rahway River watershed was divided into 100-acre lots. Within twenty years or so, a small village began to take shape at the intersections of East Broad Street, Central Avenue, and Mountain Avenue. This was, and still is, the heart of Westfield.

On January 27, 1794, Westfield formally separated from Elizabeth and was "made a separate Township, . . . to be called by the name of the Township of Westfield." At the time of its separation from Elizabeth, Westfield was a rural community that included one Presbyterian church, about fourteen houses, one store, one blacksmith shop, one tavern and one school house. (Philhower, p. 51.) The town "had been in substantially this condition for nearly a century. . . ." There was absolutely no growth." (*Id.* (quoting Clayton).)

The arrival of the railroad, and the beginnings of the industrial revolution, marked a turning point in the history of Westfield. The first train passed through Westfield in 1838, and by the 1860's, the Central Railroad of New Jersey enabled passengers to ride from Westfield to Jersey City (and thence by ferry to lower Manhattan). The railroad promoted Westfield as a fine place to live; a sales brochure promised that commuters would travel in "*luxurious palace* coaches"; that Westfield residents were "entirely free from all inflammatory [sic] or chronic diseases;" and that the town had just built a "tasty

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¹ Berkeley Heights, Clark, Cranford, Hillside, Scotch Plains, Springfield, Union, and Winfield.

² Fanwood, Garwood, Kenilworth, Mountainside, New Providence, Roselle, and Roselle Park.

³ Elizabeth, Linden, Plainfield, Rahway, and Summit.

and commodious" school." (Johnson, p. 36.) An 1894 brochure similarly boasted that "Westfield, indeed, hath charms. Where in the wide, wide world, is the grass greener, the sky bluer, or the air purer? Why, the very exhilaration of such an atmosphere sets every nerve a tingle, and the whole world aglow." (*Id.*)

The last two decades of the 19th Century saw a rush to progress in Westfield. In 1882, the population of the township was 875; by 1900, the population had climbed to over 4,000. (Philhower, p. 53.) Between 1880 and 1890, three newspapers were established in the town. Electric lights arrived in 1893; the public water supply was established in 1894; a sewer system was installed in 1895, and the trolley appeared for the first time in Westfield in 1898. (Philhower, p. 93.)

The little rural village was quickly becoming an urban center. It is against this backdrop that the township leaders began a push, in 1900, to incorporate Westfield as a city.

II. THE CITY MOVEMENT -- PHASE ONE

The incorporation of Summit City in 1899 provided the spark that inspired Westfielders to consider changing their form of government. A progressive group known as the Westfield Sound Money Club initiated the movement during the presidential campaign of 1900. In November 1900, the club disbanded and another club, the Good Government Club, was established in its stead. The club formed a committee to visit Summit and report on the new city's progress, and a public meeting held to discuss the issue drew a "large attendance." (Union County Standard, December 18, 1900.) The attendees of this public meeting decided to arrange an advisory election of "all legal voters who voted in Westfield at the last election" to vote on the question whether or not to incorporate as a city.

Newspaper columns written before the advisory election highlighted the controversy. On one side, proponents of city government foresaw progress, employment, and growth:

With a city government we could have such things as Plainfield and Summit have, and we lack namely: All the year work for carpenters, painters, masons and tinmen....During a large part of last year when our mechanics were idle because no building was going up in Westfield, buildings were going up in great numbers in the cities round about us. PLAINFIELD and SUMMIT WERE BOTH SMALLER THAN WESTFIELD UNTIL THEY BECAME CITIES. NOW PLAINFIELD HAS TWENTY TIMES OUR MONEY and five times our population, and Summit already has several times as much money and is rapidly beating us in population.

Why talk of laws and figures, and why imagine strange things? Plainly we have the better situation, but we lack a government to do business with. Plainfield and

Summit have beaten us solely because they did not have an antique form of government to keep them back.

(Union County Standard, January 4, 1901.)

In the same issue of the newspaper, another columnist took the opposing view. He urged that Westfield could have everything it wanted "and much more without any change of government." The writer warned: "The organization of a city takes too much power away from the people and places it in a board of seven councilmen and a Mayor. We warn the people against an act that will make *city fathers* of a few, who may do with us as a tyrannical father might do with a child." (*Id.*)

In a subsequent town meeting, public sentiment was against any change in Westfield's form of government. A newspaper article dated February 8, 1901, reported on the "eloquent plea" for city government made by Martin Welles, the chairman of the township committee. Welles argued that if Westfield were a city, "the taxpayers at large would not be compelled to stand the expense of lateral sewers or of opening new streets which did not affect their property." (Union County Standard, February 8, 1901.) He also described how hard it was for the current township government -- consisting merely of three committeemen -- to handle the work of the township (a point that drew a derisive response from the audience). On the other side, one man expressed the fear that under the city form of government, "the people would grow careless and elect men to the common council who were not honest." (*Id.*) A couple of weeks later, the voters overwhelmingly rejected the proposal, and the issue was dropped for over a year.

III. THE CITY MOVEMENT -- PHASE TWO

In 1902, the question of Westfield's government was raised anew, and by early 1903 the issue was again being vigorously debated. Some residents were concerned that taxes would rise if Westfield became a city. Others argued that tax dollars would be better and more wisely spent if Westfield were a city:

A tax used by a capable business-like government is like capital in business. In Englewood and in Summit the tax is the best investment of each inhabitant...Every tradesman, mechanic and land owner is better off, because Summit was made a city. Summit has acquired a class of population which our trades people and mechanics and land owners are anxious to get into Westfield. Land values in Summit and Englewood have increased....There is a somewhat lower tax in Clark and Mountainside communities adjoining Westfield. But Clark and Mountainside are dead and miserable. Every cent of their tax is a loss to the tax payer, who receives nothing whatever for his tax. The present management of Westfield tends toward Clark and Mountainside. A better government would work for the conditions of Summit and Englewood.

(Union County Standard, January 2, 1903.)

On January 23, 1903, the Westfield Local Government Committee submitted its report summarizing the advantages and disadvantages of the township, borough, and city forms of government. Basically, the city government appeared to have more power and more resources. A city would be governed by a mayor and a seven-member city council representing different wards. (As a township, Westfield had only three committeemen and no mayor.) A city could control the licensing of saloons (excise power) and the use of the streets. It also had greater power to pass ordinances and to enforce them. In a city, the council could raise money by taxation; in a township, appropriations were voted by the people. Summarizing the report, the Union County Standard editorialized: "There is but one thing to do -- Incorporate as a City and keep up with the times. Westfield has a grand future before her as a City -- as a Township -- none." (Union County Standard, January 23, 1903.)

At a public meeting one week later, a large crowd gathered to debate the issue. The group unanimously agreed "that the present Township government is inadequate." A large majority also agreed that the borough form of government would also be insufficient. However, some residents were concerned that in a city, the council's taxing power would result in higher taxes. Others feared that limitations on a city's ability to issue school bonds would "handicap our school facilities, for which people came to Westfield, [and] would be a public calamity." Finally, there were those who favored the city form because they "did not care to have people in Elizabeth determine our excise privileges." When put to a vote, the vast majority (42 to 7) voted against the city government proposal.

It was at this meeting that the idea of becoming a *town* was raised (or at least reported on) for the first time. This was a new, compromise position supported, it seems, by those who preferred the city form of government but realized their proposal was not going to carry the day. Certain town leaders thought the "Town would be a move in the right direction." As the Union County Standard put it: "If we can't have a City, let us have a Town." (Union County Standard, January 30, 1903.) In a later article, the newspaper opined that the project to incorporate as a city might have been "premature and a little ambitious." (Union County Standard, February 13, 1903.) The town form of government was viewed as "an advance, not too great, yet offering advantages...." (*Id.*) The Westfield Manual -- written by two of the town leaders just after the town was finally incorporated in 1903 -- explained why the "town" compromise ultimately won favor:

- (1) ... under the Town the schools would still be independent, while in a city they would be a part of the municipal system; and
- (2) ... the dread which some had of the name "City," it foreboding greater opportunity for misgovernment.

(Thompson and Taggart, p. 5.)

In a matter of weeks, legislation was drawn up and was under consideration in Trenton. Some opposition developed, apparently by certain county officials "who considered themselves politically imperiled by Westfield's incorporation" as a Town. But the opposition quickly died out, and on March 4, 1903, the state legislature passed Chapter 14 of the Laws of 1903 pursuant to which Westfield became a "town." That is where the matter stands today, almost a century later.

IV. CONCLUSION

Westfield's decision to become a town was more than a simple choice between two statutory forms of government. Westfield's "growing pains" reflect the overall shift in America at the turn of the 19th Century from a rural to an urban society. The heated controversy that surrounded the decision suggests that, to the people of the time, the decision to become a "city" or a "town" was a symbolic act as well, fraught with emotion and colored by the residents' aspirations and fears.

Westfield ultimately rejected the city model, and settled for a middle-ground, compromise position. As a town -- not a city, no longer a rural village -- Westfield set a course for itself as the quintessential New Jersey suburb it has become today.

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