

Press Release

The Village of Woodsburgh will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of its incorporation on November ,1962. It was 50 years ago, November ,1912, that the Village of Woodsburgh was officially incorporated. As early as Oct. 3, 1902, R. L. Burton proposed the incorporation of this village (Woodmere).

Woodsburgh was founded by an old Rockaway inhabitant, Samuel Wood, who made his fortune in 1868 in the wholesale liquor business. In 1869 at the age of 79, Samuel Wood used the bulk of his fortune to purchase 400 or 500 acres of land near his birthplace with the intention of developing it into a fashionable summer resort and having the area named after him.

Samuel Wood's first project was to construct his summer resort hotel, the Pavilion, at a cost of \$140,000.00 - a three-story wooden building consisting of 80 rooms with accommodations for 150 guests. The Pavilion was provided with a bowling alley, gas-house, ice-house and stable. It was surrounded by a large piazza and afforded a beautiful view of the Atlantic Ocean, Great South Bay and Jamaica Bay. The Pavilion was patronized by a very high-toned and eminently respectable class of guests. Mr. Woods also built a railroad depot, smaller hotels and cottages. Samuel Woods was also responsible for the main road "The Boulevard" which ran from Woodsburgh depot (Woodmere Station) across Broadway to Hempstead Bay and was about 80 feet wide. Mr. Woods built a smaller hotel, The Neptune House, which he intended as a roadside house and at a cost of \$20,000.00. Along his famous Boulevard were nine eight room cottages. The Woodsburgh Riding Park was opened Dec. 27, 1878. The Rockaway Hunt Club was opened in 1800 and on its first hunt ~~most~~ took a fox behind the Woodsburgh Pavilion. 2, 2, 2.

As Woodsburgh continued to grow, many additional private cottages and boarding houses were built and new roads were constructed. In 1879, the Eastern Railroad Company constructed a line running from Eastern New York to Ocean Point depot (Cedarhurst). With all these improvements and ~~conveniences~~ conveniences of transportation, the Woodsburgh area continued to thrive.

Mr. Woods died at the age of 83.

WOODMERE, 1870-1908

by
Kathleen O'Connor

June 1962

"Woodsburgh, Rockaway, is expected to revive the glories of the old Rockaway Pavilion as the favorite watering place in this part of the world."¹ This statement was made in May 1870. What happened in this area that warranted such a comment when three years earlier only half a dozen farms and one main road could be seen? What was the effect on the local farming community?

The old Rockaway Pavilion in Far Rockaway was the gathering place of the wealthy summer visitor. Few other people could afford the long trip to Far Rockaway via a train trip to Jamaica and then the hiring of a stage coach to the shore. In 1863 the Rockaway Pavilion was destroyed by fire and in 1865 the Brooklyn and Rockaway Beach Railroad constructed a route to another part of the seashore that attracted the traveler and city dweller away from Far Rockaway.²

In hopes of attracting the growing population of the city to the Far Rockaway seashore the South Side Rail Road "... incorporated a subsidiary called the 'Far Rockaway Branch Rail Road Company of Queens County'."³ This branch ran from Valley Stream to Far Rockaway and it was opened to the public on July 29, 1869.⁴

Soon after the coming of the "Branch", as the railroad

was called by the local inhabitants, many small villages sprang up at various points along the five mile track. One of these was the village of Wood's Station, later Woodsburgh, which was first mentioned in the time table of October 1869.⁵ Woodsburgh was founded by an old Rockaway inhabitant, Samuel Wood.

Samuel Wood's father was a well-to-do farmer of Far Rockaway who raised six children, four boys and two girls. In 1841 "... the four brothers," David, Samuel, Abraham, and Epenetus, "went to New York City and established themselves in the wholesale liquor business."⁶ At this enterprise they made a fortune and by 1868 Samuel Wood was the sole survivor of the brothers and the holder of the family fortune. In 1869, at the age of seventy-five, Samuel Wood invested much of this fortune in buying between four and five hundred acres near his place of birth. This area, named in honor of its founder, was planned "... with the intention of making it a fashionable summer resort ... and to lay the foundation of a town that he hoped would grow and prosper through all time."⁷

Samuel Wood immediately began to construct his summer resort. He built a railroad depot, cottages, hotels, and laid out roads. The main road, the Boulevard, was about eighty feet wide and ran from the depot across Broadway to Hempstead Bay. The main hotel, the Pavilion, was constructed at the cost of \$140,000. It was a three storied wooden building with two wings. There were eighty rooms with accommodations for one hundred and fifty guests. The Pavilion was also provided with "... a bowling alley, gas-house, ice-house and

stables."⁸ I would imagine from the pictures that I have seen and the newspaper descriptions that I have read that this hotel was extremely attractive and picturesque. It was surrounded by a large piazza and offered a view of the Atlantic Ocean, Jamaica Bay and the hills of East New York and Cypress Hills.⁹ Samuel Wood also constructed a smaller hotel, The Neptune House, which was less elegant than the Pavilion but just as comfortable. Lining the Boulevard were nine eight room cottages. Many roads were carefully laid out, the land divided into lots, though no other cottages had been built. The founder of Woodsburgh also provided a dock, bath houses and a steam pleasure yacht.

The first two seasons, 1870-1871, must have been fairly profitable and encouraging because it was noted in the newspaper that the Woodsburgh Pavilion was "... undergoing extensive improvements. Its length was increased by ninety feet and its west wing was enlarged."¹⁰ Also the newspaper mentioned the building of a few cottages on the vacant lots of Samuel Wood. The original nine was increased to eighteen by the 1890's.

The proprietors, who leased the hotels for the season, offered many diversions and the hotel rooms and cottages were usually filled by spring. The village and the surrounding areas also offered entertainment to the increasing number of visitors¹¹ and to the year round inhabitants. "The beautiful¹² Woodsburgh Riding Park" was opened on December 27, 1878. The Rockaway Hunt Club was opened in 1800, and on its first meet the hounds over-took the fox in a field behind the Woodsburgh

Pavilion, in full view of a large party of spectators.¹³ Trotting and racing matches were held by the Rockaway Hunt Club and other organizations.

There were many boarding houses and private cottages being built. New roads were constructed and Broadway was macadamized. In 1879 the Eastern Rail Road Co. constructed a line that ran from East New York¹⁴ to the Ocean Point Depot (Cedarhurst) and stages ran from the Pavilion to the Ocean Point Depot. All these improvements, and the convenience of transportation helped to increase the influx of visitors and permanent residents to the Woodsburgh area.

By 1872 a New York newspaper remarked that "Woodsburgh, L. I. is looming up quite grandly and formidably."¹⁵ It was a grand summer resort for many years, but in this role it had its effects on the local community. Many new needs developed. For instance many fairs were held to raise money for the construction of a local church. And in 1871 the Methodist Episcopal Church was erected in Woodsburgh. The farmers sold portions of their land to individual buyers¹⁶ who were interested in building a home in this fashionable area. In order to meet the demands of the summer visitors small local stores were started and local people were hired to keep the buildings and grounds of Samuel Wood in repair. The local farmers still farmed wheat, hay, and vegetables; raised hogs and cattle. Much of the produce went into the kitchens of the Pavilion, Neptune House, and cottages of the Wood estate. For instance a notice in 1882 announced that "M. Charles has taken a contract to supply

the Pavilion with milk during the season."¹⁷ There are many instances where the farmer made improvements on his own land. Many built stables to accomodate the polo ponies and horses of the summer resident.

A fairly permanent population of the area must have increased quite a bit because by 1877 a second church was in the process of being constructed. Though this church, Trinity Church, was in Hewletts the Woodsburgh's citizens donated money for its building. Samuel Wood "... gave \$1500 toward the purchase of a pipe organ."¹⁸ There was a post office located in a private house which was sending out and receiving two mails daily. A "Wm. H. Black announced that he would open a Private Academy on one of the cottages, for the special instruction of boys."¹⁹ A saw mill was constructed, and a tailor set up shop. There was even talk of establishing an annnua~~l~~ fair at Woodsburgh. "The Western Union Telegraph Co."²⁰ ... established a station at the Pavilion." The growth of the village and population concerned the residents because by 1877

there was considerable discussion among the residents of Woodsburgh on account of there being no school at an nearer point than Hewletts. Several residents contended that the population of Woodsburgh had grown so rapidly within a few years as to be double of almost all the neighboring villages.²¹

This happy story of the founding of a prosperous and rapidly growing community slowly evaporated. Samuel Wood had died at the age of 83 years. "His will provided that three-quarters of a million dollars would be used in establishing

and endowing a Collge of Music."²² Much of Samuel Wood's fortune was willed to him by his brother, Abraham, in 1868 and this will had been vigorously contested by a nephew. The litigation, at this time was pending an appeal in the Supreme Court.²³ This court case lasted for many years and when it was finally settled the interests of the various owners were represented by the local Hewletts Land and Improvement Company.²⁵ This group was interested in selling the Wood estate, but I gather, that they found it difficult to find a buyer who would offer a price that would satisfy the various interests.

Woodsburgh showed but small residential growth during the late 1880's and 1890's and by 1900 the newspaper was led to comment, "everybody hopes" the Wood estate "will be sold. Many say give it away, if nothing better, in order to further the interests of the village. The disposition of this property is the key to the prosperity of this section, and no improvement of any account will come until the property is placed on the market for sale in subdivision."²⁵

Prosperity was to come again to Woodmere.²⁶ And by 1908 Woodmere was evolving from a resort area to a suburban residential area. This result was achieved by the work of Robert L. Burton. But what had transpired in eight years to cause such a dramatic change?

The Hewletts Land and Improvement Company was able to sell the three hundred acres of the Wood estate to Robert L. Burton's syndicate²⁷ by May 1901. But negotiations took over a year because of certain claims against the property and the "demand

for exorbitant prices for the land from certain owners."²⁸ The syndicate, Cedarhurst Land Association, was very busy during this time. It is noted by the newspaper that Burton purchased, for \$9,000, Thomas F. Mayer's land at Brower's Point;²⁹ "the Vigotty estate property at Brower's Point and also several small pieces of adjoining land."³⁰ Robert L. Burton also purchased "the Lewis F. Hicks property on the Boulevard, opposite the railroad station";³¹ a ten acre corner plot on West Broadway and the Boulevard opposite the railroad station.³² With the acquisition of the Wood estate and the other purchases R. L. Burton "owned practically from Hempstead Bay to the head waters of the Jamaica Bay."³³

Once Burton had acquired title to the Wood estate he began to relocate the existing buildings. In four months R. L. Burton had rushed ahead with improvements at such a speed that the newspaper was led to comment that "the transformation that has been made in the short time since he has owned the property is most remarkable."³⁴ In this time R. L. Burton had razed the old Pavilion Hotel; moved its bowling alley to Neptune Ave. near the railroad station; contracted to relocate sixteen of the cottages on the estate; moved the hotel from the old Lewis F. Hicks property to another location and erected an office building on the site; started constructing eight cottages; and at his own expense, improved and created new roads, one of which connected Woodmere to Cedarhurst and the Rockaway Hunt Club; and generally beautifying the grounds. In order to accomplish this Burton had a force of "nearly 300 men at work, consisting

of stone masons, brick layers, carpenters, plumbers, teamsters and laborers of various kinds. His payroll for labor was running about \$3,600 weekly."³⁵

This fast moving pace had its effect on many of the members of the community. It would be impossible to enumerate the many individuals who moved their cottages, bought plots of land and erected homes, or improved their buildings and property. In 1907 alone over thirteen residents were erected."³⁶

During the next years Robert L. Burton bought more land and continued to build and improve his property. I received the impression that one of his aims was to keep the village as pictureque and beautiful as possible. It was reported in 1902 the "R. L. Burton is having telephone poles erected thro³⁴ through the middle of his property so that the wires will be in the rear of the houses." Later in the same year when the Queens Borough Electric Light and Power Co. of Far Rockaway erected poles they were placed "along the east side of the property"³⁸ and the connections with the houses were made underground. He also built a boarding and livery stables near the railroad station to "accomodate the occupants of the cottages between Broadway and the railroad, who wished to keep horses, as no stables are permitted in that section."³⁹ This venture proved so prosperous that large additions were later constructed. Burton also constructed the railroad station and turned it over to the Long Island Railroad. He used stone from the rapid transit tunnel being constructed in New York City. He also used this stone in the building of

many of the cottages.

Another aim of Robert L. Burton was to encourage merchants to come to Woodmere. He did this by erecting many stores on Broadway and the Boulevard near the railroad station. Many of the old farming families became members of this merchant group. The Hewlett Brothers coal and feed business was established near the railroad station in 1902. "The Gramercy Market opened on Saturday, April 25, 1903 in R. L. Burton's store building, remodelled from the old Woodsburgh House (Neptune House)."⁴⁰

There was no lack of entertainment for the summer and permanent resident of Woodmere. Such organization as the Keystone Yacht Club, the Rockaway Hunt Club, and the Woodmere Bowling Club offered diversions. Attending lectures, polo and hunting events, small clubs, and affairs held by the fire departments also provided the people with an almost constant array of activities.

By 1808 Woodmere was a thriving community throughout the year. And it is no wonder that the newspaper listed almost every week the construction of new homes and the annual return of the leasees of Burton's cottages.

Robert L. Burton and the Woodmere Land Association⁴¹ expended over \$1,000,000 to build Woodmere into a permanent residential area. This money was spent on "landscape gardening, and in building roads, light and water plants and forty houses" (each of them was worth between \$8,000 and \$50,000)⁴² "stables and a station on the Long Island Railroad." On August 12, 1908 Robert L. Burton sold his holding for \$3,000,000

to the Woodmere Land Association.

The change of Woodmere from a small farming community to a permanent suburban town is a living monument to the ideals and enterprise of two men, Samuel Wood and Robert L. Burton.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Picket, May 20, 1870
2. Seyfried, Vicent F., The Long Island Rail Road; Part One, South Side R. R. of L. I., (Uniondale, Salisbury Printers, 1961) p. 22. These areas are the present Hammel's, Seaside. and Rockaway Beach.
3. Ibid., p. 23.
4. Ibid., p. 25.
5. Ibid., p. 80.
6. "The Late Samuel Wood", South Side Observer, March 29, 1878 This business was located near the Fulton Market and went under the firm name of David Wood. The four brothers " ... entered into an agreement to remain bachelors during their lives." As each brother died they left the bulk of their estate to the survivors.
7. Wyckoff and James, agents of Samuel Wood, Woodsburgh, L. I., The New Summer Resort, (1871) p. 1.
8. Ibid., p. 4. The architect of the buildings was Mr. S. H. Knapp, of New York and they were built by Mr. William H. Noe, of Brooklyn. The Neptune House was constructed at a cost of \$20,000 and it contained thirty rooms.
9. "A Day at Woodsburgh", South Side Observer, January 26, 1872
10. Idem.
11. South Side Observer, August 17, 1877 The list of guests at the Pavilion shows that they came from many part of the United States and foreign countries as illustrated below:
 - E. Machardo and family- West Indies
 - Dr. Joseph E. Ranos- Havana
 - Capt. James Johnson and family- Tennessee
 - W. D. Hardy and family- Savannah
 - Col. Wm. R. Banker- New Orleans
 - F. H. D. Tross- Brazil
 - Dr. Geo. L. Sursdorf- Berlin
 - W. A. Brintzinghafter- Baltimore
12. South Side Observer, December 14, 1877

13. Allison, Benjamin R., M.D., The Rockaway Hunting Club, (Vermont, Alan S. Browne, 1952) privately printed
14. South Side Observer, March 7, 1879
15. The New York Standard, as quoted by the South Side Observer, June 14, 1872
16. "Rockaway", South Side Observer, March 8, 1872 As an example -- "J. H. Hicks has sold his four acres at the rate of \$400 an acre, to a gentlemen from Albany."
17. "Woodsburgh", South Side Observer, April 7, 1882
18. "Woodsburgh", South Side Observer, July 20, 1877
19. "Woodsburgh", South Side Observer, July 27, 1877
20. "Woodsburgh", South Side Observer, April 18, 1878
21. "Woodsburgh", South Side Observer, October 18, 1879
22. "The Late Samuel Wood", South Side Observer, March 29, 1878
24. "The Late Samuel Wood", South Side Observer, March 29, 1878 Abraham Wood's will left his estate to Samuel Wood after his death it would revert to a second cousin. The value of the estate of Samuel Wood was estimated at \$1,000,000.
25. The records and accounts of this group are not attainable.
26. Woodsburgh became Woodmere after a post office was established in January 1898. The name was changed because there were other towns with similar names - Woodbury, L. I. and Woodsburgh, N. Y.
27. This syndicate was composed of wealthy residents of Cedarhurst, of which Robert L. Burton was the principal holder.
28. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, January 12, 1900
29. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, May 18, 1900
30. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, October 12, 1900
31. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, November 16, 1900
32. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, May 10, 1900 West Broadway runs parallel to Broadway.

33. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, May 31, 1901
34. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, May 24, 1901
35. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, August 30, 1901
36. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, March 27, 1908 These statistics were furnished by the Long Island Railroad Company - 1907
37. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, February 14, 1902
38. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, April 25, 1902
39. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, January 24, 1902
40. "Woodmere", South Side Observer, May 1, 1903
41. The Cedarhurst Land Association changed its name to the Woodmere Land Association in 1903.
42. "Woodmere-Hewletts", South Side Observer, August 14, 1908

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

- Allison, Benjamin R., The Rockaway Hunting Club, (Vermont, Alan S. Browne, 1952) privately printed
- Bellot, Alfred H., History of the Rockaways; 1685-1917, (Far Rockaway, Bellot's Histories, Inc., 1917)
- Goldstein, Esther, "The Upper Branches", History of the Rockaways, (General Organization, April 1932) Sponsored by the Exchange Club of Far Rockaway, New York and written by the students of Far Rockaway High School.
- Seyfried, Vincent F., The Long Island Rail Road; Part One, South Side R. R. of L. I., (Uniondale, Salisbury Printers, 1961) published by Vincent F. Seyfried.
- Smith, Mildred H., Early History of the Long Island Railroad; 1834-1900, (Uniondale, Salisbury Printers, 1958)
- Work Projects Administration, The Story of the Five Towns, (Nassau Daily Review-Star, 1941)

NEWSPAPERS AND PAMPHLETS

- Berliner, Mrs. Herbert, ed., Know Your Five Towns, (The League of Women Voters of the Five Towns, 1955)
- South Shore Record, October 30, 1950
- South Side Observer, 1870-1872; 1877-79; 1882-1883; 1897-1898; 1900-1904; 1908
- The Picket, February 18, 1870
- Wycokoff and James, agents for Samuel Wood, Woodsburgh, L. I.; The New Summer Resort, (1871)

OTHER SOURCES

- Town of Hempstead; Records, 7, (Oct. 1859- Oct. 1883)
- Town of Hempstead; Outside Records. 14, (Sept. 4, 1900- Sept. 19, 1903)