

Small Town – Significant Impact

By Karen Ferguson, Town of Kirkwood Historian

The Town of Kirkwood is a small town with less than 5000 residents, yet it has been a leader in various ways throughout the past 250 years due to its location along the Susquehanna River, the Erie Railroad and multiple highways.

In 1781, Revolutionary War Soldiers started settling along the banks of the Susquehanna River in an area that would later become the Town of Kirkwood. Amongst the first settlers was Jonathon Fitch who set up the first grist mill near the mouth of the Susquehanna and Fitch's Creek. This was the only mill within 40 miles and folks would travel this distance to get their grain. Within a few years, several other families made their homes in this area because the topography was perfect for farming and the hills were good for grazing. The large pine that covered the area was used for homes, as well as income. Garrett Snedeker and his son-in-law David Bounds would float the pine down the river to the Chesapeake Bay and sell them to ship builders to use as masts on tall ships.

In 1797, the State Legislator gave its sanction to the Albany and Schenectady Turnpike Company for building a toll highway. This successful undertaking led the way for more than 500 additional turnpike companies to construct a network of roadways throughout the state. Several entered Broome County with 2 intersecting the Town of Kirkwood. The "Catskill Turnpike" passed through northern Kirkwood along Old State Road and the Coshecton and Great Bend Turnpike was extended north through the Town of Kirkwood and became known as Highway 11. Needless to say, having these transportation routes through the town had a huge impact with respect to more people settling in this area and increasing opportunities for business and trade.

Another Kirkwood family who had significant impact on the area's growth was the Peter Wentz family. His son William Wentz became a surveyor throughout Broome County. He made some of the early surveys for the Erie and Albany & Susquehanna Railroads. In 1828, he laid out a junction road between the Colesville Road and River Road (Hwy 11) of which Crescent Drive is one remaining section of it.

With enthusiastic anticipation of the Erie Railroad coming through Kirkwood, a developer laid out streets and sold lots while River Road farmers profited from value appreciation of their frontages. In 1848, James Pugh Kirkwood was the engineer who successfully designed the Starrucca Viaduct allowing the Erie Railroad to continue its trek toward the Great Lakes. The Erie land agent and company attorney got the green light to proceed as rapidly as possible in acquiring the real estate necessary for the right-of-way, sidings and depots. They paid \$7323.50 for 22 parcels in the Town of Kirkwood. Construction was very rapid and completed to Binghamton in January of 1849. Mr. Kirkwood also supervised construction of this section of railroad, thus becoming acquainted with those who lived here.

In 1859, the Town of Kirkwood was officially established and named after the engineer who helped bring so much growth to the area. By this time, it had developed into 5 hamlets: Riverside; the Village of Kirkwood; the Langdon Hamlet; Kirkwood Centre (a/k/a 5-mile point); and Brookvale. There were 10

schools throughout the town, post offices and churches in each hamlet, as well as stores, mills, blacksmiths shops, hotels, etc. A record number of Irish immigrants came to Kirkwood from 1860 to 1880 due to the demand in railroad jobs and economic boom.

About this same time-frame, a large portion of land owned by Mr. Ebenezer Park was sold to the State Hospital for the development of the farm. The Binghamton State Hospital Farm was in operation for 72 years when Governor Nelson A Rockefeller proposed that the farm, as well as other state-operated farms be closed. A public auction was held for the livestock and farm machinery in March 1960. A year later the State Legislature allowed the sale of 780 acres to New Industries for Binghamton (NIFB) for the purpose of developing an industrial park in Kirkwood. An additional 8 acres at the intersection of Highways 11 & 17 was given to the Town for recreational use and is now the site of Valley Park.

In June of 1961, a 500-acre Industrial Park was proposed and a study was conducted. At the beginning of 1963 a time-line was proposed that included the start of construction for the Colesville Road extension, detailed engineering plans for the sewer-water district, and the engineering plans for the tract itself that would pave the way for grading, building of roads and other phases of the development to entice industries. Finally in April 1964, bids were accepted for the construction of water and sewage mains. At this point 2 firms had announced plans to build in the new industrial park: Railway Express Agency (REA) and VailBallou. REA starting building first and put up a one-story terminal on 3-1/2 acres. In June of 1964 came the announcement Kason Hardware Corporation will start building on 12 acres in the industrial park. Two weeks later another announcement was made that Link had purchased 33 acres from NIFB to locate in Kirkwood. Shortly after that, Frito-Lay acquired property. Sixty years later this industrial park is active and is still home to Frito-Lay, Fedex, Raymond Corporation, 84 Lumber, and so many others.

With the construction of the industrial park finally beginning, a nearby site was prime property for the development of a new shopping center at Five-Mile Point. The plaza would house an A&P supermarket, the Kirkwood Pharmacy, and a branch office for the First City National Bank. They also proposed space for a restaurant, laundromat, beauty shop and gift shop. The timeline for completion was midwinter of 1964. While the names of the stores have changed, the plaza is still in use today and a vibrant hub of the Town.

Simultaneous to the development of the area was the opening of the Penn-Can Highway which spurred this industrial growth. During the opening ceremony on August 17, 1961, state highway officials disclosed that they were accelerating plans to complete the Penn-Can Highway (I-81) north through Binghamton as well as construction of the east-west Route 17 expressway. Also a new Conklin bridge was being constructed that would span across the railroad tracks and Susquehanna River to connect Highway 11 and Route 7.

With all this new development and hiring of workers brought a need for housing for all the employees. This need was met primarily with a large housing development located north of Stratmill Rd, the Five-Mile Point neighborhood, and a multi-million dollar apartment complex built along Route 11.

Government during this time adapted to the anticipated housing and economic boom. Over a period of

several years, a Planning and Zoning Board was created and an updated Zoning Ordinance was adopted along with a new Town Zoning Map. In 1963, a former town garage space was converted into a new Town Hall and included a meeting space for community activities and also a kitchen. In the late 80s, a new Town Hall was built and the former building houses the Post Office.

Schools & churches also had to adapt to the housing & baby boom. Windsor expanded the high school and built two new elementary schools. Floyd Bell opened first in 1957 while CR Weeks began construction in 1963. Susquehanna Valley also expanded in the Kirkwood area and opened Cedarhurst in 1958. St. Mary's Church in Kirkwood attendance grew to about 500 members and built a new church building on its existing property and demolished the old one in 1968.

In 1967, the State Police built a new headquarters on Route 11, one mile south of Five Mile Point. The 3200 square foot, one-story building was devoted to office space on the ground floor. The basement housed a squad room, locker rooms, storage rooms and showers. A 3-car garage was proposed to be built behind the building. Eventually the State Police headquarters was relocated and the old facility became Progressive Dental.

With Kirkwood being at the crossroads of railroads, major interstates and highways, it is an ideal location for industrial and commercial uses, as well as tourism opportunities for travelers. Our small town will continue to be a viable place to live and work for years to come.