

The History of Glenbrook

Location & Setting

Glenbrook is a neighborhood in the city of Stamford, Connecticut, that is located a mile and a half northeast from the old city hall. Glenbrook's boundaries have always been rather indistinct, but this study will include most of the area covered by the present zip code boundaries, with a number of significant exceptions. Consequently, it is bounded on the north by the neighborhood of Springdale, Toms Road being the dividing line; on the east by the Noroton River, separating it from the Town of Darien; on the south by Hamilton Avenue, the northern boundary of the Linden House condominium complex, and Holcomb Avenue. The western boundary is the most problematic, extending as far west to include Coolidge Avenue and Mayflower Avenue but not the area closer to Strawberry Hill, which is generally more associated with Stamford proper. Further north the western boundary includes Elmbrook Drive and Rutz Street, but not those streets further west, which comprise the neighborhood of Belltown. It should be noted that the adjacent area in Darien, located on the east bank of Noroton River, was historically considered part of Glenbrook but will not be covered in this study primarily because of its jurisdictional separation from the rest of the neighborhood.

Topographically, Glenbrook can be described, in large part, as a broad valley, inferred by the "glen" in its name, while "brook" most likely refers to the Noroton River, or more precisely the "brook" running through the "glen" that included both the Stamford and Darien sides of the river, thus underscoring the historic inclusion of the Darien side of the valley. Therefore the only obvious boundary of Glenbrook, the Noroton River, is not really a boundary at all but an important descriptive feature that runs through the village and not on its edge. Glenbrook is one of those communities whose identity is not defined by arbitrary boundaries, whether they be instituted by the post office, the fire department, census bureau, or urban geographer. Its identity derives from its center, a relatively flat area traversed by a one-track railroad, which is crossed by two major highways within a short interval, i.e., Glenbrook Road and Crescent Street. This central area is marked by several important landmarks: the Union Memorial Church and the old Glenbrook School, and occupied by less visually important structures that serve as destinations for a large number of people, i.e., various commercial establishments, the railroad station, etc. This central valley or "glen" is bounded by higher ground to the south and west (and to the east if the Darien side were being included in this study), but the rise in elevation is relatively gradual, only a few hills comparable to these elsewhere in the city. In general, the slopes of these hills are oriented to the central glen or valley, i.e., Hope Street descending from the south and Rock Spring Road descending from the west, thus showing a natural relationship to the central area unequivocally considered Glenbrook. The farther one travels from this central area the less association there is with Glenbrook, especially when the towers of downtown Stamford become visible in the distance.

The Formation of a Community, 1866-1900

Glenbrook owes its existence primarily to the one-track railroad built in 1867 from Stamford to New Canaan, Glenbrook being the first station on the line, probably because the main road to New Canaan, today's Glenbrook Road, crossed the tracks at that point. The area was then known as New Hope, one of the less developed rural districts of Stamford with only 16 dwellings, one store, and a wax and camphor factory established years before. The only streets were Hope Street, Glenbrook Road, New Hope Street (today's Church Street), Rock Spring Road (with no houses at all), and the highway consisting of today's Crescent Street and Courtland Avenue south of Crescent Street.

The advent of the railroad created a wave of land speculation, short-lived to be sure, but nonetheless sufficient to initiate small-scale urban development. In October of 1866, J.M.B. Whitton of Philadelphia bought 19 acres of land on the north side of Glenbrook Road from Edward Haight for \$7,000, the proposed railroad running down the middle of the property.¹ By 1868 he had divided the property into 54 lots, most of them 60-feet wide and fronting on three new streets: Railroad Avenue (Cowing Place), shown on early maps with the railroad running down the middle of the street, Cottage Avenue (Kirkham Place), and Union Street. In November of 1867, John Konvalika of New York City bought the adjacent 15 acre lot to the west from Ammon Wilson for \$6,000, divided it into 45 lots averaging 60-feet in width, and opened two new streets: Elm Place (Elm Tree Place), parallel with Cottage Avenue; and the continuation of Whitton's Union Street, which connected to Hope Street at its western end.² Meanwhile, local landowner Charles E. Hoyt subdivided a portion of his property south of New Hope Street, laying out Scofield Avenue in June of 1868, initially a dead-end street off Hope Street with 12 lots.³ In 1871 George P. Schlocker laid out 52 lots along Schlocker Avenue (Pine Hill Avenue), essentially a dead-end extension of New Hope Street, west of Hope Street. John A. Holmes, who lived across the river in Darien, began to develop the eastern end of the district in 1872, extending Courtland Avenue north to Glenbrook Road and laying out Maple Avenue (Maple Tree Avenue), Oak Avenue (Oakdale Road), and Glen Terrace. The larger of the 53 initial lots were further subdivided over the years, although, to this day, this area's lots are larger than those of other subdivisions and consequently feature larger dwellings. The name "Glenbrook" apparently began to be used in the 1870s. When Holmes first started to sell lots in 1872 the deeds stated the location as New Hope; by 1874 the deeds used Glenbrook instead.⁴

Although not directly effecting early development in Glenbrook, the wax and camphor factory would ultimately figure prominently in the community. Charles H. Phillips moved his manufacturing operations to the banks of the Noroton River in 1856, shipping his materials to Stamford by schooner and then having them carted to the New Hope location by ox and horse

¹ Town of Stamford, *Land Records*, Book 42, p. 250.

² *Ibid.*, Book 44, p. 112.

³ *Ibid.*, Book 45, p. 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Book 48, p. 437; Book 52, p. 441.

teams.⁵ As early as 1868 the factory was noted for its elaborately landscaped grounds, very unusual for an industrial site. The Phillips name is best known for its Milk of Magnesia, patented in 1872. Sterling Drugs absorbed the company in 1923, which operated at the site until 1975. The importance of this institution in Glenbrook was not so much as an employer of local people—Glenbrook was not a factory town in the usual sense of the word—but for the Phillips family themselves, who were philanthropists of the highest order, supporting various community activities and institutions.

By 1890 it was apparent that the initial flurry of real estate activity had dissipated. Of the 112 lots laid out during the first years of train service, only 34 had been developed. Significantly, however, several of these were for institutional use. In April of 1882 the Town of Stamford bought a lot on Elm Place where it constructed a two-room schoolhouse.⁶ Previously, the children of the district apparently attended the schoolhouse across the river in Darien.⁷ Nearby, on the corner of New Hope and Cottage Avenue, the Glenbrook Union Chapel was constructed in 1885 to accommodate the Glenbrook Union Sunday school organized by members of the diverse Protestant denomination as an alternative to traveling long distances to the established churches. In subsequent years it would evolve into the Union Memorial Church, established in 1896, the primary institutional and architectural landmark of the community.⁸ Another addition to the fledgling village was a second railroad station, this one on the main line, located at the corner of Courtland Avenue and Crescent Street, and including the local post office.

Interestingly, this rather sluggish rate of growth was not of particular concern to its residents, who seemed to appreciate their rustic surroundings. On the contrary, their primary concern was the fear of becoming part of the newly proposed City of Stamford. By 1892 urban development had long extended beyond the old borough, and a newly formulated city government was being promoted as the means to provide various urban amenities to this larger urban expanse. Initially, Glenbrook was included within the proposed boundaries, but its residents proclaimed their outrage at this inclusion at every possible occasion and went so far as to hire a Bridgeport lawyer to buttress its objection to this inclusion. The General Assembly Committee subsequently asked the State's Attorney for Fairfield County to redraw the boundary line because of this determined opposition and the expense of installing urban facilities there.⁹ The boundary line was then drawn to exclude every house in Glenbrook and would continue as such until 1949, when the town and city governments were consolidated.

⁵ Virginia T. Davis, comp., *Stamford, Connecticut Historic Resources Inventory*, Stamford CT: Stamford Community Development Program, 1978, 650 Glenbrook Road.

⁶ Town of Stamford, *Land Records*, Book 59, p. 192.

⁷ D.L. Scofield, surv., *A Map of the Property, J.M.B. Whitton & J. Konvalinka, Situated at New Hope 1 ½ miles from Stamford, Conn.*, New York: G. Schlegel, 1871.

⁸ Rev. Blaine Edele. "A Window on Our Past: Susannah S. Palmer." Union Memorial Church, 26 August 2001.

⁹ Estelle S. Feinstein, *Stamford in the Gilded Age*, Stamford, CT: Stamford Historical Society, Inc., 1973, p. 210, 215.

Architecture before 1900

Because of limited development before 1900, Glenbrook's stock of early houses was relatively small to begin with, and recent development has eliminated the more elaborate examples, perhaps the most notable being the Arthur House at 596 Glenbrook Road, an excellent example of an Italianate Villa. A more modest Italianate dwelling survives at 413 Glenbrook Road, also known as the John Leeds House. It features a low-pitched roofline with a centered gable and bracketed eaves. The short-lived real estate boom associated with the railroad resulted in a number of Second Empire dwellings, the least altered example located at 38 Union Street, which features the style's trademark mansard roof, a French innovation allowing a full story of usable attic space, as well as a bracketed cornice and trelliswork front porch. 24 Oakdale Road is a rare example of the stick style showing horizontal raised boards imitating structural members of the house, as well as stickwork designs in the peaks of its gables. The related Queen Anne style characteristically exhibits a picturesque massing of shapes and a variety of textures. 88 Maple Tree Avenue retains ornamental woodwork in its gable peaks and front porch and features an angled 3½-story tower. 31 Oakdale Road shows ornamental shingles and an elaborately detailed front porch including urn-like turned posts, ornately covered pediments, and a cutwork apron. Next door, #25 features a tower-like polygonal bay and an overhanging, pedimented stairway bay.

An Expanding Community 1900-1920

In spite of Glenbrook's exclusion from the newly formed city of Stamford, its development started to accelerate around the turn of the century. In 1898 a new four-room, fieldstone-walled schoolhouse was constructed on Crescent Street, which was gradually being developed with modest houses. In the following years the Ayres Brothers Land Company opened up a 56-lot subdivision at the very heart of the community. This subdivision straddled Glenbrook Road and included Parker Avenue, which was laid out south to Scofield Avenue, already extended to Glenbrook Road through Charles E. Hoyt's property. The recently abandoned schoolhouse on Elm Place was consequently moved from its original location to one of the lots on Parker Avenue.¹⁰ Towards the end of 1899, the Hughes Brothers opened up a 60-lot subdivision at the northern edge of the district, bounded by Toms Road and Hope Street and including Glen Avenue, Rutz Street, and Derwin Street, the latter two streets essentially undeveloped until the 1940s. In 1907 the larger development of Glenbrook Terrace was laid out across the remainder of the Charles E. Hoyt Property. Numbering 105 lots, it included Center Street, Rose Street, and Scofield Avenue, all already laid out but otherwise undeveloped, as well as Fowler Street (Center Terrace), Goodwin Street (undeveloped until the 1950s), Oscar Street, and Morris Street. In 1910 George E. Scofield laid out Douglas Avenue with 16 lots.¹¹ In the same year Glenbrook's largest real estate development was inaugurated—Courtland Terrace, which comprised the southeast

¹⁰ *Through Eighty Years*, Union Memorial Church, 1976, p. 4. For a photograph of the building, see Renee Kahn, comp, *Stamford Connecticut Historic Resources Inventory*, Stamford, CT: Stamford Community Development Program, 1978, 37-39 Parker Avenue.

¹¹ Town of Stamford, *Land Records*, Book 147, p. 103.

quadrant of the district, including Lenox Avenue, Fairmont Avenue, Tremont Avenue, Midland Avenue, Courtland Hill Street, Field Street, and the east side of Courtland Avenue. It included over 200 lots and was laid out in four stages.

During this period, community facilities expanded significantly, in large part due to the largesse of the Phillips Family. Ella Francis Phillip, wife of Charles E.H. Phillips, commissioned the construction of a Community Hall on Crescent Street, which became the home of the Glenbrook Girls Club and the Glenbrook Junior League, and the transformation of an existing house on the property into the Glenbrook Library. On the rear of this lot, a building was constructed to house the New Hope Fire Company, organized in 1917. Nearby, however, the railroad station on the main line was discontinued, last being mentioned in the city directory in 1918.

By 1920 Glenbrook had grown to a community of 1,270, according to that year's census, including 50 living in the still largely undeveloped area within the city limits of Stamford. Fully half were of native stock, including these of colonial "Yankee" origin and the relatively assimilated third generation of foreign origin, compared to immigrant districts like the South End, where the native stock was only 16%. The other half, of foreign and mixed foreign and native stock, included representations of 22 groups, the largest being the Irish (174), German (117) and English (97). The accompanying occupational information presents a community that was decidedly middle class. Although the Philips Company was important because of its owner's philanthropy, it was not an important employer on the scale of Yale & Towne on the South End.¹² Consequently, there are few indications of the typical immigrant district, with only a scattering of two-family houses, one three-story tenement on Parker Avenue, a four-family house on Rose Street, and another on Hope Street. On the other hand, there weren't that many households with servants, compared to districts like Shippan Point or the wealthier enclaves in Darien and Greenwich.

Architecture 1900-1920

Since the community expanded more rapidly during this period, there is consequently a larger stock of houses designed in styles that were popular at this time. The Colonial Revival style, the result of the country's growing interest in its colonial past, became the area's dominant style. Its earlier phases retained the asymmetrical massing and large front porches of the Queen Anne style. The hipped-roof variant is represented by a number of houses on Tremont Avenue. The gambrel-roofed or Dutch Colonial subtype, also common, is exemplified by 33 Cowing Place, which includes a segmental-arched, pedimented entry porch. A large side-gabled example is located at 67 Fairmont Avenue, which features a triangular pedimented entry porch, matching pedimented dormers, and a two-story Tuscan-columned side porch. Closely related to the colonial Revival is

¹² The Phillips Company may have employed a larger percentage of the community on the Darien side of the river, as the existing apartment house and rows of double houses seem to imply, perhaps having originally served as worker housing for the factory's employees.

the uncommon Neoclassical style differentiated primarily by a porch supported by colossal (two-story) columns, as represented by 71 Cowing Place, which also shows matching colossal pilasters. Also popular during this period was the Craftsman style, which generally avoided classical elements, in contrast to the Colonial Revival, and stressed hand-craftsmanship and natural materials. Typified by wide porches, low-pitched roofs, and overhanging eaves, it is represented by examples like 35 Oakdale Road, which includes a broad inset front porch; 24 Fairmont Avenue, which includes bracketed eaves and trussed gables; and 123 Courtland Hill Street, a one-story version or “bungalow” featuring battered porch posts and fieldstone walled first story.

Competition of the Community’s Fabric, 1920-1940

During the 1920s Glenbrook’s growth accelerated and by the end of the decade most of its vacant land had been subdivided. In 1922 Monroe Park was opened up, including the southern extension of Center Street, as well as Faucett Street, Frisbie Street, and Hall Place (Hallmark Pl.). In the same year Abram Spelke developed Ely Park, located between Glenbrook Road and the railroad’s main line and bisected by the northern extension of Culloden Road. Both of these developments were divided into 25-foot wide lots, which denote the feverish real-estate climate of the period. Significantly, all houses were built on at least two adjacent lots, establishing a minimum lot size that would later be codified by zoning laws, and giving Monroe Park 27 buildable lots and Ely Park 68. In 1923 the Harris Construction Company subdivided most of the old Raymond estate and adjacent property to the north into 143 lots and laid out streets named according to an early American theme: Plymouth Road, Puritan Lane, Pilgrim Walk, Mayflower Avenue, and the south side of Colonial Road, the latter being already laid out on a 1908 map but otherwise undeveloped. The northern side of the street was subdivided in the same year by the Connecticut Title and Guarantee Co., headed by Abram Spelke, and totaled an additional 56 25-foot lots, i.e., 28 buildable lots. These subdivisions exemplified the rapid growth of the city during this period, especially since they straddled the city line, making it appear that the city of Stamford was literally bursting at the seams and spilling over into the neighborhood that had vociferously rejected the city 30 years before. In the following year the property south of Rock Spring Road was divided by Adams & Ingells into 309 25-foot lots (154 buildable lots) under the name of Coolidge Avenue, Cowan Avenue, Holcomb Avenue, Hillendale Avenue, and Abel Avenue, the last two undeveloped until after World War II.¹³ Unlike the Harris subdivision north of the road, this development was entirely within the city limits but was slower to develop, possibly because of its uneven terrain—it had previously been part of the Hillendale Golf Club. As with the development to the north, it shows an unbroken continuity of development between the city and Glenbrook, making it difficult to place a meaningful community boundary. The old city line made some sense when the area was undeveloped but was now completely arbitrary, while a boundary as far west as Strawberry Hill Avenue is perhaps too far reaching, as this street has always been oriented to

¹³ Because of a sudden drop of elevation, Abel Avenue was originally two dead-end streets even though maps showed one street. As the lower, eastern portion was being developed in the 1960s, its name was changed to Kennedy Lane.

the city, serving as one of its most fashionable thoroughfares. The fourth major subdivision of the 1920s was Homestead Heights, developed in 1925 by the Vick Realty Company and comprising 54 lots linking the following streets: Howes Avenue, Nash Place, Pierce Place, Brooklawn Avenue, and the west side of Glenbrook Road. It also straddled the city line but most of it was outside of the city. Unlike Prospect Park and the Colonial Road area, it was restricted to one-family houses. Other streets opened during this period were Windell Place in 1924, Cowing Place and Cowing Court in 1926, and Arthur Place in 1930, along with subdivisions of smaller properties that did not involve the construction of new streets.

Accompanying this physical growth, the maturation of the community was highlighted by the establishment of new institutions and businesses and the expansion of existing ones. In 1923 the Union Memorial Church underwent a major physical transformation into the imposing, Gothic Eclectic edifice that has remained the major landmark of Glenbrook to this day. In the following year the community's industrial base expanded by the construction of a large complex for Norma-Hoffman Bearings, manufacturers of precision roller bearings, primarily for aircraft. Located on rail-side property north of Hamilton Avenue, it was noted for its attractive landscaping, following the lead of the Phillips Chemical Company, which had pioneered the practice of being a good neighbor by attending to the appearance of its property. By the 1920s Glenbrook School had acquired a full second story but it was soon apparent that both the structure and its site of less than an acre were inadequate to accommodate the burgeoning enrollment. Consequently, its replacement, the Julia Stark School, was built on a much larger tract of land on Glenbrook Road, being named for a former principal of the old school. The rapid growth of the Catholic population resulted in the establishment of St. Maurice's parish in 1935, followed in the next year by the construction of a Gothic Eclectic fieldstone church on an elevated site just south of the Stark school. Throughout the period, the Phillips family continued their philanthropy. In 1924 Mrs. Phillips deeded the community hall, firehouse, and library to the Union Memorial Church, which eventually sold them. In 1928 she formed the Glenbrook Garden Club, responsible for planting trees throughout the community, an example being the dogwoods lining Courtland Avenue.

Architecture 1920-1940

During this period the Colonial Revival style continued to dominate the architecture of the newer subdivisions but was supplemented by examples of more adventurous styles, particularly the Tudor style. The major example of this style and easily the largest and most extravagant dwelling still standing in Glenbrook is the Gladys Phillips Crofut mansion located at 666 Glenbrook Road, overlooking the Noroton River and currently occupied by offices. Built for the great-granddaughter of Charles H. Phillips, it features an asymmetrical facade of multiple, steeply pointed gables, variegated brick, leaded windows, half-timbering, and multi-shafted chimneys, clearly a dwelling appropriate for the wealthiest enclaves of Stamford, and even those of Darien and Greenwich. Other examples include 78 Oakdale Road, a representative of the early, symmetrical phase of the style, showing a fieldstone first story and paired front gables. Just down the street, #46 features a battlemented entrance tower, while a two-family example at 48 Treat Avenue shows a steeply pitched entrance foyer with an arcaded wing wall. The rare but closely

related French Eclectic or Norman style is represented by a stuccoed, two-family house at 57 Treat Avenue, which features a striking three-story, conical-roofed entrance tower.

Ecclesiastical architecture in Glenbrook is represented by the Gothic Eclectic style, exemplified by the Union Memorial Church, which features a two-story, lancet-arched window at its facade and smaller versions at the sides alternating with prominent buttresses. St. Maurice's Roman Catholic Church features corner buttresses at its nave and off-side square tower, as well as a large second-story round window in the nave.

Overdevelopment and an Uncertain Outlook, 1940-The Present

Glenbrook continued to grow in the traditional sense throughout the next thirty or so years. The last large tracts of land were subdivided in the 1940s: Sutton Place, located north of Hamilton Avenue, and the area including Glendale Road and Elmbrook Drive, both areas in one-family zones. Improvements were made to community facilities, the New Hope Fire Co. (a.k.a. Glenbrook Fire Co.) receiving a new, two-story brick firehouse in 1954. However, as the community's vacant land was developed, a number of changes began to occur. Vacant lots in areas allowing two-family houses were automatically developed with two-family houses, unlike previous years when one-family houses were still being built even though two-family houses were permitted. This attitude of maximizing the return on such an investment soon focused on oversized lots, which soon became developed with apartment houses and condominiums. Most of the houses on these larger lots were older structures often still maintaining historic and architectural integrity. Most of them were summarily demolished, but a few were saved including the Crofut mansion, recycled into offices, and the Leeds house on Glenbrook Road. Such private redevelopment expanded to encompass smaller properties. Crescent Street in particular has been almost completely transformed, the old Glenbrook School being one of the few survivors. The Community Hall and Library are long gone, as are several notable commercial establishments including the Blue Note Inn on Courtland Avenue. A more subtle but nonetheless serious weakening of the area's integrity is the alteration of those remaining structures, involving the removal of significant architectural elements such as porches and ornamental woodwork, the concealment of original surfaces in vinyl and aluminum, and the latest fad: adding ersatz "historical" elements to structures that never had them originally. Underscoring the aforesaid debasement of the built environment is the deterioration of the natural environment, namely the alarming decrease in shade trees, whether on private lawns or public streets, which has resulted in a particular bleakness on a number of streets in vivid contrast to those neighborhoods that have retained the verdant suburban look that attracted homebuyers to Glenbrook in the first place. One wonders what Glenbrook's anti-city crusaders would say if they could see Glenbrook today. The challenge for those who recognize the community's strengths and weaknesses is to determine what action to take to improve the community or at the very least protect what still remains.

Recommendations for Further Study

The following neighborhoods are locally significant from an historic or an architectural standpoint and warrant further study, including eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places and/or as a local historic district.

Oakdale Road – Glen Terrace

These streets, together with adjacent properties on Courtland Avenue and Glenbrook Road, include the most significant and diversified collection of houses in Glenbrook. Most were built between 1890 and 1930, primarily one-family houses in the following styles: Tudor, Craftsman, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, and Stick. Contributing to the neighborhood are large shade trees of various species.

Courtland Terrace

This area comprises the Courtland Terrace subdivision, including Tremont Avenue, Fairmont Avenue, Lenox Avenue, Midland Avenue, Courtland Hill Street, Field Street, and the east side of Courtland Avenue. Built between 1910 and 1930, all are one-family structures designed primarily in the Colonial Revival and Craftsman styles, and complimented by mature landscaping and street trees.

Elm Tree Place and Vicinity

This area includes the original, adjacent subdivisions of Glenbrook detailed in the 1871 map, as well as Douglas Avenue to the immediate north. It includes notable examples of the following styles: Second Empire, Colonial Revival, Craftsman, and Tudor. The neighborhood is anchored by Glenbrook's primary landmark, the Gothic Eclectic Union Memorial Church.

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