The History of Hillside

Early History

Native Americans and Tenant Farms

The Weckquaesgeek was the Native American tribe that lived in our area. Local lore suggests that a winding trail ran through the Hillside area. We know that an Indian trail ran through the Hillside area. In 1882, the Weckquaesgeek sold what are now Hastings and Dobbs Ferry to Frederick Philips, who divided the Hastings area into four tenant farms. From 1775 through 1783 the farm that encompassed Hillside was rented by Hastings tavern owner Peter Post, who played an instrumental role in Hastings’ Battle of Edgar’s Lane. After the Revolutionary War, Peter Post paid £715 for the 286-acre farm he had previously rented, just to the north, James deClarke purchased a 2½-acre parcel for £97. Eventually, Van Brugh Livingston of Dobbs Ferry came into possession of the Hillside/Reynolds Field parcel. William Edgar bought most of deClarke’s property, a portion of which eventually became Children’s Village.

Hillside as a Residential Estate

In 1842 Livingstone sold 60 acres of Hillside land to Alexander Birnie for $1,050. Birnie built a two-story Greek Revival-style house where the water tower now stands. In 1864 Mary Dabney Smith bought the property for roughly $27,000, and they remodeled the house in the French Empire style. The gardens and greenhouse were near what is now the Hillside tennis court area. The Smith family owned the estate for 33 years, selling it in 1897 to Letitia Sands. The Sands family sold the property two years later to the Cochrane family (after which Cochrane’s Lane), who lived there for some 14 years.

The Establishment of a Hospital

Hillside then passed into the hands of David W. McFarland, a doctor who remodeled the house into a hospital, which he named the Spring Hill Sanitarium. In 1903 the Village adopted zoning regulations that classified the 49 acres outside the hospital as Prime A Residential. Four years later, McFarland sold his property to the Jewish Mental Health Society, who moved 46 mentally ill patients into the former mansion and renamed it Hastings Hillside Hospital.

Two years later, the Society filed plans for a $1.25 million expansion to accommodate 160 new patients. The Village rejected the application as a non-conforming use and sued the Society. New York State courts sided with the Village. In 1936 the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case, which meant that the lower court’s ruling would stand. As an alternative, the Society filed plans in White Plains to develop their property into single-family homes. The development, called Spring Hill, would have extended existing Hastings streets into the Hillside area. These plans never came to fruition.

The Hillside Nature Guide Program, run by volunteers, continues to this day. Children at Hillside School were enlisted to write letters of support in the effort to preserve Hillside Woods. This letter is one that was included in the packet put together by The Committee to Preserve Hillside Woods.

The Effort to Preserve Hillside Woods

In 1959, 39.7 acres were declared as a park under New York State, as well as contributions by local residents. It was due to the efforts of these citizens and our Village administrators at the time that this large section of Hillside came to be a Village/County Park, with access open to all Westchester residents. In 1964, a series of school-sponsored nature walks were first organized. The Hillside Nature Guide Program, run by volunteers, continues to this day.