

FOREST HILLS and the DYGERT BROTHERS

Tucked in the northwest corner of Perinton on the border with East Rochester lies a unique suburban subdivision called “Forest Hills.” The area, like much of East Rochester, is a planned development whose homes were custom built by Harold and Lawrence Dygert.

Harold P. Dygert was born on May 23, 1889, in South Hammond, Lawrence County, New York. When he was two years old his parents moved to Despatch (later to be named East Rochester). Harold graduated from high school in East Rochester and then, according to his grandson, he took an architectural engineering/drawing correspondence course from Columbia University. During his lifetime, beginning in the 1920s and through the 1960s, Harold claimed to have designed and built over 600 homes – mostly in the East Rochester area – but also in Brighton, Pittsford, and the City of Rochester. Harold’s brother, Lawrence (Larry), supervised the construction of most of the Dygert homes, acting as a business manager and building superintendent. According to Dygert family members, Lawrence was as able an engineer as Harold was a draftsman but apparently was a better businessman.

Prior to development of the Forest Hills area, Harold designed and built some individual houses, but Forest Hills became his first major project and apparently remained his favorite, probably due to its variety of architectural styles. His earliest known plans for the area are penciled “overlays” superimposed on a site survey done for him by John Abner Stuart in 1927. Part of the surveyed area, referred to as “Parkcroft,” included a section bounded by East Filbert Street, South Lincoln Road, East Ivy Street, Park Drive and Madison Street. The undeveloped area to the south, today’s Forest Hills, was designated Parkcroft Heights, and included a street, Buena Vista Drive, of 51 plots, which is known today as Ridgeview Drive. The penciled overlays show an extension of Madison Street and a suggestion of what eventually would become Fair Oaks Drive. Whatever construction was proposed for the late 1920s did not occur, however, presumably because of the Great Depression.

Titles and abstracts of the properties that surround the wooded areas of Westwood Drive and Fair Oaks Drive show that ownership was transferred from Daniel Turrill to Roswell Turrill in 1821. Turrill then purchased adjacent properties from Asahel Lusk, Jr. and Lucy A. Mann. He eventually left the property to his wife, Letty, and the property was known as the Letty Turrill Farm until the late 1890s when it was sold. In 1898, owner Egbert Etts deeded the farm to his daughters, Emma M. Leaman and Sarah Aldrich.

The 1924 Plat map shows that Emma Leaman owned the land to the north, corresponding to Fair Oaks Drive, Regency Drive, and the wooded area of Westwood Drive. Approximately three acres of land to the east of 39 Ridgeview Drive was owned by Elizabeth Waite and is undoubtedly the derivation of Waitefield Drive. The land to the south, which today includes Lake Crescent Circle, was owned by Marjorie H. Cox. Lawrence Dygert purchased this tract of land in 1931.

Despite the Depression, the 1930’s was a busy time for Harold Dygert as he designed custom homes for the Forest Hills lots. Title abstracts record plots that were sold to original Forest Hills residents from 1932 to 1939 and include many whom Dygert included in his promotional brochures (Rockwell, Witham, Kerner, Kellogg, Payne, Covert, Hoffman, Gross and Abel). Interestingly, the first of these properties was



purchased in 1932 by John Abner Stuart, the gentleman who had done the early site survey in 1927. By 1942, Forest Hills boasted about 75 finished Dygert-designed homes. Advertised prices for a house and lot ranged from \$5980 to \$8500.

Apparently construction of houses in Forest Hills did not begin on the street first plotted along “the Ridge” but commenced along Lake Crescent Drive. Photographs exist that show land adjacent to the Lake Crescent pond on Fairport Road being cleared and the house at 6 Lake Crescent Drive progressing to roof level. In the background, trees on “the Ridge” are evident but the area is devoid of any signs of construction.

Harold Dygert personally did the architectural design work in collaboration with each original resident, which accounts for the one-of-a kind nature of Forest Hills homes. Residents who dealt with Dygert came to know him as an opinionated and determined man with strong stylistic feelings. The fact that individual residents had an influence in the design process may well account for the wide variety of architectural styles in Forest Hills, and the fact that all plans were drawn by a single draftsman may account for the evident harmony of those multiple architectural styles. Dygert also took great care with the details. Members of the family indicate that many trips were made to Pennsylvania to bring back oak timbers for the floors, paneling, doors and woodwork that distinguish the homes. Stone masons were brought from the Adirondacks and camped on-site while completing the impressive brick and masonry highlights.

The seventy-five Dygert designed homes within Forest Hills feature a variety of architectural styles. Approximately a third of these are Tudor Revival in style. There are an equal number, approximately 30% in total, of English Cottage and French Eclectic design, the later characterized by round tower entrances and referred to by Dygert as “Norman style.” Approximately 20% of the homes fall into the category of Colonial Revival, done in wood, brick and stone, many featuring second floors, and one having Southern Colonial columns. One of the two done in French Regency style gives its name to Regency Drive. In general, building progressed from Lake Crescent Drive in the early 1930s to Ridgeview Drive and Westwood Drives (in the mid-1930s) to Fair Oaks Drive and Regency Drive in the late 1930s. The Art Deco house at 13 Regency Drive was begun in 1941 and finished in early 1942, the last of the “classic” Dygert homes to have been completed.

With the onset of World War II, all construction ceased. When building resumed after the war, ranch style homes of the 1950s filled the remaining vacant lots.

Today Forest Hills remains a distinct and easily recognizable section of the Town of Perinton.

With thanks to Kenneth Dodgson whose booklet provided the bulk of the information contained in this column.

