

Introduction

The day of the closing—that legal mumbo-jumbo moment of check signing and paper swapping when a property changes hands—I stood in the pouring rain outside the mortgage broker’s office where the event was to take place. My husband had dropped me off to go park the car, and as I waited for the mystifying ritual to begin, I did my best to engage the seller in conversation. It was a minimal and strained exchange. I sensed that part of her did not want to sell the house and that she was not much interested in talking to me, but she did offer offhandedly, “It’s a Sears house, or . . . something like that.” The sale of her—but soon-to-be-our—house was upon us, the lawyers sat waiting, and there was no time to quiz her for more information. But I had heard all I needed to hear to embark on what became a quest to find out if what she had said was true.

Three weeks later, I began researching Sears houses, at first casually and then in earnest—on the Internet and in libraries. Sears, Roebuck mail-order, ready-to-assemble kit houses, manufactured from 1908 to 1940 and sent by rail car to their final destinations, had by this time acquired a certain cachet. I had been intrigued by them for a long time. My 1937 house both fit the time frame and was near a railroad line. Thrilled to think my house might be a Sears house, from the moment of that brief conversation I was determined to find proof that it was. But the Sears house notion was just the first of several mysterious bits of information in regard to the house and the property that I came upon in the course of the next year.

BUYING A PROPERTY

It was 2000 when my husband and I bought our parcel of land in the town of Mamaroneck in Westchester County, New York, and in so doing acquired a house in a

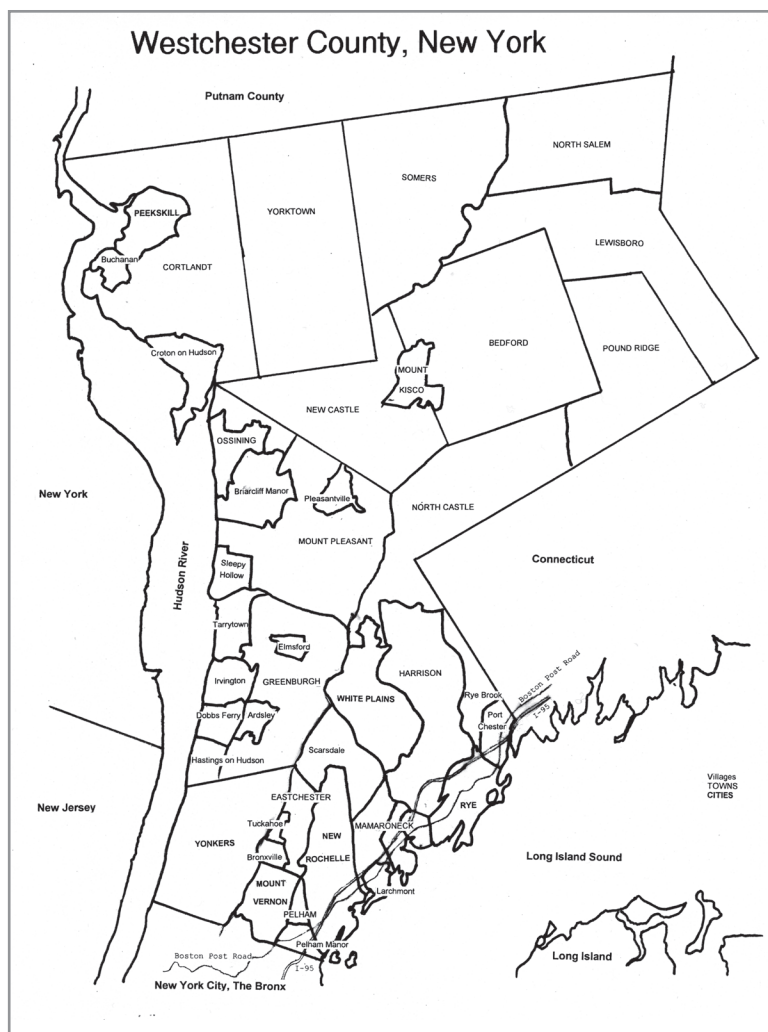


FIGURE 0.2 The cities, towns, and villages of Westchester County today with roads discussed in the book. (Map by author.)

process not unlike the one experienced by many—a right and a dream for Americans dating back three centuries. The ideology of land and home ownership has been part of the American social and political culture since colonial days. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the home ownership rate had reached nearly seventy percent, an all-time high, having grown from less than half the population in 1930.¹

Much of the time such an acquisition results in something most ordinary, especially when one is talking about an average pre-World War II three-bedroom on a one-third-acre suburban lot like ours. At the least, buyers generally view such a place as shelter, as an investment, and perhaps as something that holds the promise of a future renovation or expansion. At best, it might be a bargain, a great location, something cozy and inviting, a place that acquires sentiment over time, or maybe a choice particularly suited to a family's needs. Only rarely is it extraordinarily beautiful or situated with a stunning view; even less often does it hold historic significance, architectural pedigree, or landmark status—rarely is there anything extraordinary about it. With our house we thought we had found something just right in terms of location and size and, indeed, to us it was cozy and inviting, but otherwise it seemed perfectly ordinary. Not only was it a typical suburban three-bedroom, but it was also a Cape Cod, possibly the most commonly found house in America.

The very ordinariness of this particular lot-and-house combination now stands in contrast to something more. In our case, and undoubtedly in that of many others, digging deeper would uncover some surprising things. Ever so gradually, peeling back layers of history, I have found that the house and the land it occupies are anything but ordinary. The remarkable adventure of discovering what makes the apparently commonplace special started the day we bought the property and expanded when more information came my way serendipitously, creating for

me three mysteries to be investigated and changing my relationship to the house and the property forever.

THE MYSTERIES

Among the numerous documents we acquired at the closing was a letter from the village building inspector written in response to our lawyer's query about a certificate of occupancy. I noticed in the letter a reference to the house having had, at one time, a different address. How odd. I determined that the name of our street had not been changed, so why would the house have had another address? To find out, I went in search of the former address. Four blocks away, I found the answer. Although the street of the original address still exists, the house number does not. Where the house should be, according to the pattern of the house numbers, is a highway.

A few months later at a small social gathering hosted by our next-door neighbors, I had the opportunity to

ask the former owner (I will call her Mrs. T——) about the second address. She seemed to be a woman of few words, but she confirmed what I had surmised—the house had been moved to make way for the interstate highway that blasted through the neighborhood in the 1950s. Where the house once stood is today a cloverleaf access ramp for Interstate 95. To her civil engineer husband the process of moving houses was a familiar one, and though she was horrified at the sight of her newly acquired house being moved up a steep hill on the back of a trucking rig, he thought nothing of it. Evidently, all went well. I now knew the reason for the former address, but still I was curious to know the details because house-moving in the suburbs of the twentieth century seemed to me an unusual occurrence.

At the same gathering I gained another piece of information, again from the previous owner. My husband and I had noticed several foot-long, rusted iron or steel stakes protruding at just above eye level from an

FIGURE 0.3 The rock viewed from the front yard of the house. (*Photo by author.*)



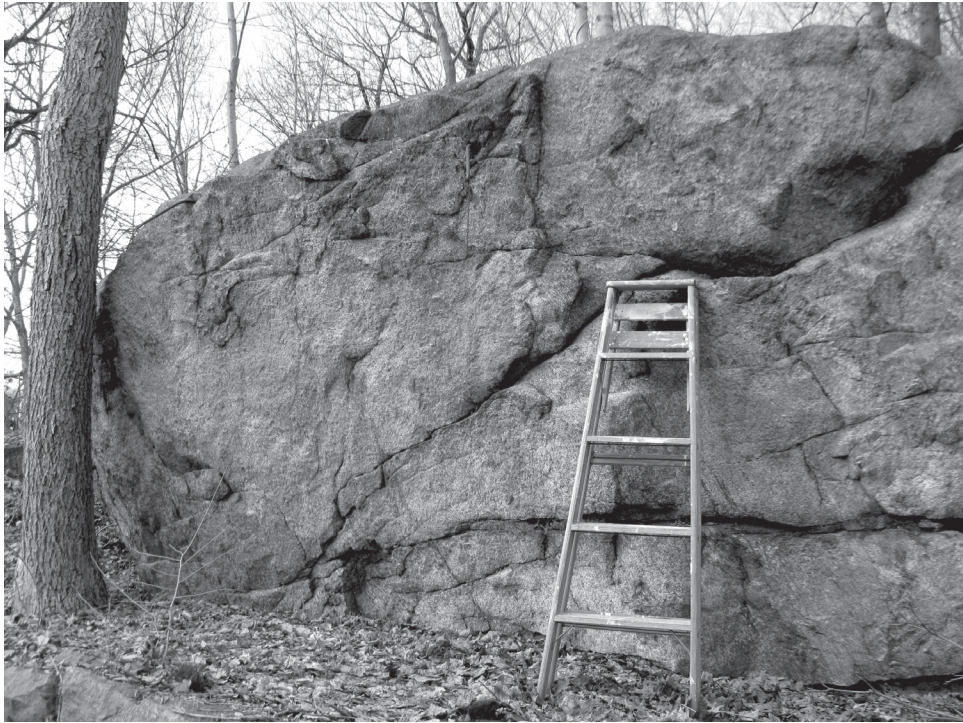


FIGURE 0.4 The rock and a five-foot ladder viewed from the back yard. *(Photo by author.)*

enormous rocky outcrop situated adjacent to the house. The density of the granite meant that someone had gone to great effort to insert the half-inch-thick cylindrical stakes into it. At roughly fifty by fifty feet and eight feet high with a flat horizontal surface of about twenty by forty feet, the outcrop is a remarkable feature of the property. Standing on the top, one is eye level with the roof of the house. When asked about the stakes, the reserved Mrs. T—— indicated they had been there in 1956 when she bought the property. “Someone a long time ago kept monkeys there, chained to the stakes,” she stated flatly and without irony. That was all she knew. Was this some kind of suburban legend? I wanted to know more.

The next part of the story did not unfold until we had been in the house for nearly a year after our Labor Day weekend move. That first summer I ventured to the top of



FIGURE 0.5 Several foot-long stakes marked with white ties are embedded into the rock a little more than six feet from the ground. *(Photo by author.)*

the rock to show it to a visitor. The summer growth season had brought the trees into leaf—two towering maples, a Norway and a sugar, and a collection of smaller offspring in various stages of development. While gingerly picking our way through the thick accumulation of weeds poking out of every crevice, we discovered, under masses of entangled wisteria vines, what looked like steps—half a dozen huge granite boulders that had been chiseled into rectangular blocks and placed so as to fashion a staircase upon which one could mount the rock from the far side. By now we believed the stakes numbered nine, the others having been revealed when the undergrowth died back during the winter. Given all we could observe, it seemed that some specific human activity had taken place on or around the rock at some time in the past. Monkeys, iron stakes, and granite steps created strange enough images, but most intriguing were the words, “a long time ago.” To an historian, such a concept is a frustration because of its vagueness. But more significantly, it is a lure. Just how long ago? It became something I had to figure out—what had taken place on that rock and when.

For some time these tantalizing questions and the other things I had learned about the property lingered in the back of my mind while I occupied my free time with settling into the house and working on the yard. One day as I was planting a perennial garden and struggling to get through the dense tangle of tree roots (with the belief that digging deep was the way to a healthy flower bed), I made an archaeological find—a flat, metal case, blackened and flecked with bits of a greenish patina, hinged to open like a book, and sized to fit in the palm of a small hand. The inside shows traces of gilding and blue paint, the bottom covered with a geometric pattern. Incised on the front in fine lines is a delicately rendered female figure, a dancing girl or nymph with arms extended, wearing diaphanous drapery and appearing to float in the air. Surrounding the figure is a shield-like

form with curvilinear flourishes. Now I had unearthed what appeared to be tangible evidence that people had been on this site long ago and that even if the house was not very old, at least the property was.



FIGURE 0.6 The copper match safe dug up in 2001 in the house’s back yard. It measures about two by one and three-quarter inches by one-quarter inch thick when closed. (*Photo by author.*)

Researching the origins and purpose of the case turned up a variety of answers. After first being told by one so-called expert that it dated from colonial times and once might have held a tiny book of verses or a woman's makeup such as rouge, I was a little disappointed to learn from a knowledgeable curator that it was probably a copper match safe, a container for matches used from the 1860s until the 1940s' invention of the lighter. She said the give-away for her was the roughly patterned bottom of the box, which appears to be a match-striking pad. Apparently, at the turn of the twentieth century every gentleman carried a match safe. Then another authority on antiques told me the form is more like a late Victorian-era or early twentieth-century matchbook case, a different category than the match safe. I have had to live with not knowing its age or original purpose, but finding it lit a fire, so to speak, in me. It led to thoughts about the past and the land where I had been digging.

LAYERS AND PLAYERS

I began to think of the land where we live as a "table" of contents, a surface, but one that holds much more than what meets the eye. I studied it closely to see what it might reveal, looking for the distinctive features of the site and its surroundings. The lot is not far from a small river, which flows into Long Island Sound and is dammed several hundred feet north of the house to form a reservoir. Nestled into the enclosing curve of one misshapen "leaf" of an interstate cloverleaf, eleven hundred feet south of the property, is the old Eleazor Gedney burial ground, an isolated chunk of land left intact by the highway's path. Civil engineers of the 1950s had altered the circular geometry ordinarily found in an exit ramp to accommodate the ancient gravesites.

Overall, the terrain of the area is rocky, the enormous outcrop next to the house the reason our lot is

somewhat bigger than those nearby. Building on the rock or dynamiting it away would have undoubtedly cost a fortune; consequently, the rocky spot ended up an appendage to the nearest lot and became, in a sense, wasted land. And the rock provides a little boost to the already relatively high hilltop elevation—at that particular point one hundred feet above sea level, the highest point from the shoreline of Long Island Sound, roughly a mile to the southeast. The entire neighborhood of 180 houses rests on top of the remnants of an ancient mountain with our outcrop likely the summit. The real estate developer who subdivided the area in the 1920s claimed to have encountered eighteen feet of solid rock through which he had to drill to put in sewer lines.² And that rock substratum is plainly visible looming above one loop of the interstate cloverleaf where the removal of a slice of a hill made way for an exit ramp.

Given the added few vertical feet of the outcrop protruding above the topsoil on our property, it must have been something of a lookout spot, lofty enough to afford a view of the sound. A view of the sound would have been possible at a time when farming kept the area nearly treeless and without buildings. The outcrop itself is flat enough and large enough for activity to have taken place atop it. In summer when the numerous trees provide shade, we have chairs there and use it often as a seemingly remote and secluded woodland retreat. I wondered how else this speck of land might have been used in times past. What secrets does it hold? It became increasingly clear to me that much more had gone on here than the modest house and its quiet suburban cul-de-sac let on.

The land can tell us about much of what has happened in a given place. Every piece of property on this Earth has histories—geological, topographical, archaeological, geographical, architectural, demographic, political, economic, social, and cultural. The land has a recent past,

Examine Your Property

Investigate your property and your neighborhood to get a real sense of them by simply walking and observing. Take a tape measure and determine short distances as you walk and gauge drivable distances with your car's odometer. Study the geography, especially any features that are relatively unlikely to have been moved—natural ones such as streams, rivers, other bodies of water, and rock outcroppings, as well as manmade ones such as roads, cemeteries, stone fences and posts, old foundations, and ruins of any kind. In my neighborhood I noticed a place where the curb abruptly changes from Belgian rock to poured cement, an indication that part of the street was old and part was newer, probably post-World War II. Further research through maps confirmed that this was the case. Be cognizant of the elevation, hills, and valleys. Check the orientation of your property and house with a compass or a good map. Note any large plants that might have been there a very long time. Look at street signs and house numbers. Study contemporary maps and find and study old maps from various eras.

If you have reason to dig in your yard, take note of anything you dig up. I invited a metal detector enthusiast to scour my property with the hope he might unearth something remarkable. He did not, but keeping the numerous odd bits and pieces of things seemed like a good idea. You never know what else might turn up and what connections you might be able to make in the future. In the days before the existence of the town dump or municipal garbage collection, people would dispose of things they no longer could use by putting them in the privy. If you can locate the remains of one of those on your property, you will have an archaeologist's dream.

There are various ways to view a parcel of land. If you live near a body of water, find a boat and go out in it. Observe your neighborhood from the water vantage point. Imagine how people might have gained access to your area in the days before decent roads. What role might boats and water transport have played? View your property from an airplane, helicopter, or balloon if that's possible. If not, use Google Earth to survey your property from a bird's-eye perspective. With the ruler tool you can measure distances between everything you can see.

Examine the appearance of your building and those nearby. What styles are they? How old are they? Train your eye to pick up on key details. An interesting pattern I began to notice in many neighborhoods near mine is that every second or third house is an old one with newer ones stuck in between. Evidently people with large pieces of land in the early suburban developments subdivided them at various times, making way for newer houses to be built.

Keep returning to observe again and again. Each time you look, you're likely to see something new. As you collect data and make observations, always take notes and make sketches or photographs of anything you think you might want to refer to later. That way you are not always reinventing the wheel for yourself.

a long-ago past, a documented past, an undocumented past, and it even has an imagined past and one that never can be fully known. The land is a kind of palimpsest, a place that contains its history. According to the dictionary, a palimpsest is a “writing material (as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased” and “something having unusually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface.”³ Inhabitants “write on” or alter the land continuously, the land bearing the imprint, the evidence of humankind, both on and beneath its surface. The past is part of the present. And deeds in particular have a continuing impact on the land. Once property lines are established in a deed, they have a tendency to stay on the landscape in one form or another—a road, a stone wall, and a park boundary are but a few examples.

George Washington probably never slept on the property, situated twenty miles north of New York City just east of the Hudson Valley, but who did? I was certain that there must have been people living here before the woman from whom we bought the house. Who were they? What did they do for a living? What brought them to this exact spot? When did they arrive? What were their particular relationships to the land? Why did they leave? These questions, and others that emerged along the way, led me on a research odyssey to find answers.

The property began its association with humankind through the Native Americans who lived in this part of New York State until the 1700s. A European first laid claim to the area in 1661, as evidenced by a still-existing deed, which transferred the land from Wappaquewam, a *sakima* or leader of the indigenous Siwanoy people, to John Richbell, an English merchant. With that first deed, the land became a property—no longer just a piece of land, but real estate, a possession. Progressively, over decades, the property became part of ever-smaller farms, until developers made it into what we see today—

Databases

Databases are collections of data that have been selected and organized into a searchable format. Using them is a fast way to find targeted information. Part of what is sometimes called the invisible Web or deep Web, they are accessible only from within a website as opposed to through a search engine like Google, which searches the World Wide Web. Among the many types of information and documents typically found in databases are magazines, journals, patents, statistical data, newspapers, and all kinds of other publications. Access to some databases must be paid for, but libraries license research databases and make them available to their users without charge. Many of the ones produced by libraries, government agencies, and academic groups are free.

To research a topic, the words you enter (your keywords or search terms) are compared to all the words in the records being searched in order to find matches. Entering too many words will often result in too few, if any, results. Try entering fewer search terms. To avoid unnecessary work, it is a good idea to jot down your keywords as you go so you know what combinations you have already tried.

The claim that General or President Washington “slept here” has persisted for over two hundred years and attests to the enduring nature of the desire for such status. Using one of my favorite databases, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Complete*—available on some public library

websites without charge—with the keywords “Washington slept here” and “Washington AND slept” and a date range of 1985 through 2008, I was able to find more than a dozen headlines from the *New York Times* supporting the idea that association with the nation’s first president affixes glory and special stature to a building or piece of property. Here is a sampling, most of them found through the search described:

George Washington Slept Here
(January 13, 1985)

Washington Slept Here and There and . . .
(February 17, 1985)

Washington Really Slept Here
(February 16, 1992)

George Washington’s Troops Slept Here
(November 29, 1997)

George Washington, Among Others, Slept Here
(December 14, 2000)

Washington Slept Here . . . No, Over Here
(January 14, 2001)

Washington Slept Here. Ate Here, Too
(July 4, 2001)

Where Washington (And Slaves) Slept
(April 20, 2002)

Washington Slept Here. No, Really
(June 27, 2004)

Such a newspaper search in a full-text database such as *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Complete* finds not only headlines, but also words in the body of the article. For example, the search using the terms “Washington AND slept” also turned up an article titled “Landmarks of the Common Folk” (*New York Times*, October 25, 1990) about the urge to venerate and save the “unknown, the everyday and the ignored,” because, the article stated, “these are definitely not places where George slept.” This comment brought into focus for me the real value in using a searchable database: you can find the “unknown, the everyday and the ignored” because it searches every word, not just the title, allowing you to determine what is and what is not important.

There are a number of other useful databases for research in American history. *America: History and Life* offers in-depth coverage of North America from prehistory to the present. *American Memory* includes recordings, still and moving images, prints, and maps that document life in America. *American National Biography* contains biographic information on individuals as well as reliable bibliographies to aid further research. *Historical Statistics Complete* includes historical statistical data including demographics and economics. Databases of scholarly material include *JSTOR Arts and Sciences I-II*, *Academic Search Complete*, and *Project MUSE*. Although researching in databases requires an extra couple of steps beyond using a search engine such as Google, they are well worth the effort.

suburban streets lined with mostly quarter-acre lots where developers built, during the 1920s and the 1950s and '60s, single-family homes, a hiatus having been forced upon the process by the Great Depression and the Second World War. For the three and a half centuries for which the history can be traced, the land—which people have walked on, ridden across, farmed, mapped, and built upon—has borne witness as a kind of sentinel to all that has taken place upon it. The land itself is truly a figurative “table” of contents.

Aside from the first deed, recorded history in the precise area where the house stands dates back to the time Mamaroneck residents began keeping minutes at their town meetings in 1697, an early date by American standards, leading me to assume that much has happened there. It's not always possible to know who actually lived on a given parcel of land, but where records still exist, the owner can usually be found. And once you know an owner's name, there are other records to consult—birth, marriage, and death certificates, court records, wills, military service records, town meeting minutes, census records, and newspapers—the list goes on.

In the research associated with my property, I came across two well-known geographic place-names in the area—Heathcote and Gedney. Both Caleb Heathcote and several generations of Gedneys had owned large parcels of land in Westchester County at one time, including my property. Heathcote is the name of several roads and an elementary school in the county. And in this area, a neighborhood, the nearby cemetery, a park, a restaurant, a nursery, historic markers, at least six streets, and even my daughter's elementary school classmate bear the name Gedney. I thought it would be informative to find out who else once owned the land.

So I began my work searching deeds and studying property boundaries to find the names of the previous owners, while hoping I could solve the mysteries of the

Sears house, the house's move, and the monkeys and the rock. As I pursued my inquiry, more questions developed, expanding the project. I have been surprised when what seemed at first like preposterously unfounded information proved to be rooted in fact. On balance, what I have discovered is that the ordinary often is extraordinary once you uncover the layers to see what lies beneath. And I continue to be astonished at how much information is to be found if you look for it. It is amazing just how strong is the human drive to document our lives and to record and save information—even in the years before the digital age, which has made saving information so much easier. I have realized that in signing a thirty-year mortgage, or even a lease, one ties oneself not only to the future, but also to the past. The story that follows is a kind of genealogy of a bit of land. The supporting documentation and the methods used to develop it serve as a model for researching and understanding any apparently ordinary property.