

The Neighborhood That Sprang From Anderson Park

CONTRIBUTED BY LISANNE RENNER



The developer Aaron W. Godfrey in 1940.

AARON W. GODFREY had worked in a Mexican silver mine, hustled for big-city newspapers, and sold insurance – jobs with little apparent connection to the future career that would leave an enduring mark: residential developer of more than 200 homes in the Montclair area during the early 20th century.

When Anderson Park opened in 1905, Godfrey spied an opportunity. He bought up about 18 acres just south of the park and began building the Oakcroft development, which he described as a continuation of Anderson Park -- “a residential park.” This neighborhood of some 80 homes would be a verdant extension of the adjacent Olmsted-designed park and provide the conveniences of urban living with the charms of the country – “spacious lawns,



Edgemont Road in Oakcroft, looking north from Godfrey Road, around 1919.

Photo credits: Historic Oakcroft Collection

shady groves and many forest trees,” as a sales brochure put it.

Oakcroft was Godfrey’s first foray into development, a project that cut six new streets: Godfrey Road (of course), Princeton Place (named for his beloved alma mater), Carteret Street, Oakcroft Avenue, the Parkside, and Edgemont Road north of Brookfield. After wrapping up Oakcroft, he built more houses along other Montclair streets: Nassau, Patton, Aubrey, Norman, and Inwood among them. He also developed an entire subdivision in Clifton and bought property for a development

along Alexander Avenue that the Depression scuttled.

Now, more than a century after the first Oakcroft basement was dug in 1907, the neighborhood is one of seven that Montclair Township is considering for historic residential district designation. This summer and fall, a preservation consultant surveyed the first two neighborhoods to be studied for designation: Oakcroft and the Wheeler Street area.

As construction on Oakcroft began, The Montclair Times hailed the development as “a great improvement in that section of the town” and described its houses as “high-class residences.” Godfrey envisioned homes more architecturally ambitious than the ordinary tract house. He hired an architectural team with pedigree: George Albree Freeman and Francis George Hasselman of New York. They had collaborated on at least two Georgian Revival mansions, various clubhouses, and other projects for the well-heeled.

Their eclectic styles for Oakcroft include Craftsman, Tudor Revival, American Foursquare and Prairie influences. The exteriors are varied, composed “in different forms and styles in order to make each house sufficiently distinctive,” according to a 1910 article in American Homes and Gardens magazine. The neighborhood’s earliest houses reflect Freeman and Hasselman’s work; later houses were designed and built by others, often in the Colonial Revival style, as vacant lots were sold off. The neighborhood was heavily marketed, not just in Montclair but in New York City, with an eye to commuters since homes were a short walk through Anderson Park to the Upper Montclair train station.

One of the neighborhood’s most distinctive qualities, then as now, is its strong connection to Anderson Park. “Oakcroft has been laid out along lines that harmonize with Anderson Park,” The

Montclair Times described in 1909. Two of its streets have direct links to pathways into the park, establishing a formal pedestrian connection. “Residence parks,” a trend that Oakcroft marketing aligned itself with, were the rage in the early 1900s. They became early models of suburbia created in response to an industrialized nation and cities swelling with immigrants. Their development restrictions set the stage for the city zoning and planning codes to come; their tract associations were precursors to homeowners’ associations; and they paved the way for contemporary suburban development patterns.

Oakcroft was largely built out by the early 1930s, though its last house went up in 1946. It has weathered the decades well: Most houses retain their distinct architectural identities, with design elements such as half-timbering, wooden brackets, inglenooks, and verandas. Eleven houses are singled out as having special significance in Montclair’s Historic Inventory Viewer. One of the earliest Oakcroft homes (18 Princeton Place) is on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places. Oakcroft can also claim a world-famous resident: the astronaut Buzz Aldrin grew up at 25 Princeton Place. And that bond between the park and the people is stronger than ever. Yet by the early 1930s, the name “Oakcroft” had fallen out of use. Most people who live in the neighborhood have no idea it ever had a name. Now, as the neighborhood’s rich history receives new recognition, that special identity may be cultivated again. ■

The Montclair History Center invited Lisanne Renner, local historian and founder of Historic Oakcroft, to contribute this article. More information about this neighborhood is at www.HistoricOakcroft.org and at [HistoricOakcroft on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/HistoricOakcroft).

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