

Introduction



William J. Griggs



Henry M. Whitney



Wallace Pierce



David S. Coolidge

DEVELOPERS OF COOLIDGE CORNER

Like many of Brookline's other neighborhoods, the development of that area now called North Brookline can be traced directly to the emergence of new transportation routes and modes between this Town and Boston. A farming community in the seventeenth century, North Brookline's transition to an urban neighborhood began with the construction of a dam across the Back Bay, stretching from the Boston Common to the site of the present Kenmore Square, then part of Brookline.

In 1821 a road across the top of the dam was opened, with forks on the Brookline side leading to the Village and out along the present Commonwealth Avenue. Thirty years later another road, bisecting the forks, was extended from the dam to the Brighton line. Initially a county way, Beacon Street, as this new road was called, was built for

\$18,000, one third of which was paid for by private subscription, and was over thirty feet wide.

Between 1850 and 1855, land in this northern section of Brookline which theretofore had been devoted almost exclusively to summer estates, owned by Boston merchants, and a few large farms, owned by such Brookline families as Griggs, Corey, and Stearns, was being criss-crossed by additional new roads. In 1857 members of the Coolidge and Griggs families saw the newly created intersection at Beacon and Harvard Streets as a likely spot for a general store and built accordingly, giving rise to the name "Coolidge's Corner".

Stocked with groceries, needles and thread, patent medicines, Jamaican ginger, and kerosene, among other items, and selling oats and hay from its nearby barn, the Coolidge and Brother store remained in the managerial hands of the Coolidge family until 1884 and established for this site a commercial nature which still exists. It was a stop on the old Brookline Coach line and on the road to Cambridge. It also served both the nearby farms which supplied the Boston markets with fresh produce and the homes of, by now, several dozen families in the neighborhood.

The building of Beacon Street was clearly a major factor in the growth of the area, as illustrated by comparing the 1844 and 1855 maps of Brookline. However, the final "push" in the development of North Brookline began in 1886 at which time Henry Whitney, president of the Metropolitan Steamship Company and West End Land Company, proposed to widen and transform Beacon Street into a grand boulevard, according to the plans of landscape architects Frederick Law and John Charles Olmsted. These plans called for two drives, one for pleasure traffic and the other for commercial vehicles. A streetcar would run down the middle of the boulevard, flanked by bridle and bicycle paths, and American elms would be planted on each side of the railway track, making the street cars less obtrusive and adding to the beauty of the street.

Initial opposition to the project came from citizens who considered the project too costly; from those whose land would be taken for any widening project; and from those who wished to see Beacon Street remain a pleasure drive, free from commercial activity. Such arguments faded when it became known that Whitney controlled one half of the

1.7 million square feet necessary for the widening and had offered \$150,000 of his own funds toward construction costs.

In 1887 Town Meeting authorized the widening of Beacon Street to one hundred and sixty feet; eventual costs, including construction, land, and grade damages amounted to \$615,000. The assessed value of the land and buildings on each side of the street for approximately five hundred feet increased from \$1,955,500 in 1886 to \$6,282,900 in 1892.



*Widening of Beacon Street at Coolidge Corner
Coolidge and Brother store on left*

Having acquired transportation rights to Beacon Street, Whitney, president of the West End Street Railway, introduced the first electric streetcar in the country on Beacon Street on January 1, 1889, an event signaling the emergence of this part of Brookline from an agricultural community into a "streetcar suburb." This, the reconstruction of Commonwealth Avenue, and subsequent arrival of mass transportation on that route triggered an explosion in real estate development between the two boulevards. As one reporter wrote in 1887:

"Almost without exception, the land within easy access to the two avenues is high, dry, and healthy, and in some localities, admirably adapted to the picturesque arrangement of residences and grounds."

As pressure for development grew, large estates, farms, orchards, meadows, and even hills began to disappear. Although small areas in North Brookline continued to be farmed through the first decades of the twentieth century, for the most part, neighborhoods of one and two-family houses began to appear during the 1890's and continued to develop through the 1920's. Sometimes, they were the results of the efforts of an individual builder/developer such as Peter Graftam or David McKay; in other cases, there was no such coordinator.

These houses were built in a variety of styles, including Queen Anne, Shingle, Bungalow, and Medieval, Georgian, and Colonial Revivals. Among the architects of local as well as regional repute whose designs can be seen here are Julius Schweinfurth, Frank Chouteau Brown, Walter Kilham, Gay and Proctor, Greenleaf and Cobb, and Rand and Taylor.

While the rate of construction of the detached house was peaking, a large number of apartment houses began to appear on such streets as Gibbs, Pleasant, Babcock, and Winchester. Often brick, with elegant and restrained stone details, early versions were seldom higher than three or four stories. These residential complexes were built not only on previously undeveloped land, but also on property once occupied by houses constructed around the time of the Civil War and even as late as the 1880's.

Commercial structures were also being erected. The S.S. Pierce Building, perhaps the most familiar and visible in the area today, was constructed in 1898-99 by Wallace Pierce, with many of the neighboring blocks of stores and shops appearing on Beacon and Harvard Streets during the following three decades. The appearance of public garages, such as those found on Pleasant and Webster Streets, logically coincided with the growing popularity of the automobile.

Such growth was not welcomed by everyone. As Charles Stearns wrote:

"To the older and more conservative citizen, these buildings are interlopers, in some instances destroying old and perhaps venerated houses...Indeed, Brookline is fast losing its suburban character and becoming urban."

With its evolving urban character came an increased diversity in population. Occupied by "Yankee" farmers with a small Irish settlement clustered around Freeman Street during the second half of the nineteenth century, the area saw a growing Jewish community during the early decades of the twentieth and more recently has witnessed a growing Asian population.

North Brookline continues to change physically, too, with some buildings demolished for residential and commercial complexes and others creatively modified for new uses. A Guide to North Brookline: Five Walking Tours has been conceived and written with the intention of providing a closer look at the history and architecture of this area through its buildings and the hope of increasing public awareness and appreciation of its neighborhoods.