

# Welcome to Historic Fodor Farm

## Historical and Architectural Significance of Fodor Farm

The City of Norwalk has changed dramatically since the first European settlers entered the area in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It has changed from a pastoral village in the colonial era into a 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial town and, finally into a modern suburban city. While Fodor Farm reflects some of these changes in the community, such as the rise in the immigrant population, it also remained agricultural even as the land around it was subdivided. Its existence as the last agricultural land in southern Norwalk well into the 1980's.

### District Significance

For more than three centuries farming was a part of the economic engine that drove Norwalk's growth and development. Even as the small 17<sup>th</sup> century settlement of Norwalk grew into the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial city, divided into Norwalk and South Norwalk, and then reunited into a modern suburban city of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, farming remained part of the community's fabric. At first it was a primary pursuit for many of the town's inhabitants. Then, as the town became more industrial, farming became an important but secondary part of the community's economy. By the time of Norwalk's suburbanization, which began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, farming had begun to wane. For many it had become a second occupation, one to supplement factory wages and carry on traditions begun in "the old country." Yet, it was not until the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the end of farming at Fodor Farm marked the demise of agriculture in Norwalk.<sup>2</sup>

While the district commemorates the persistence of agriculture in Norwalk, it also recognized the changes in the community's composition. Although the early names of owners in the district look back to some of the founding families of the town, the most recent owners demonstrate the important role of immigrants in the continued prosperity of Norwalk.

### Historical Significance

Fodor provided a tangible reminder of the important role of agriculture in the history of Norwalk. While Norwalk is now a city with a dense pattern of settlement, it, like all of the colonial towns of Connecticut, has a long agricultural history.

Although the land in the area was inhabited by Europeans as early as 1638, and was purchased from the Native Americans in 1640, organized European settlement of Norwalk did not begin until Nathaniel Eli and Richard Olmstead, as agents for Group of settlers, purchased the land in 1650.<sup>3</sup> As the proprietors' agreement with Roger Ludlow (who was selling them the land for their new town) demonstrates, farming was part of life in Norwalk from the beginning:

Imprimis, the sayed NATHANIEL ELI and RICHARD OLMSTEAD, doe covenant and promise and agree, that they will set upon the planting of the sayed Norwalke with all convenient speed; will move and stacke some say upon the sayed Norwalke this winter, to the end that they may, in the spring next at the farthest, breake up some ground to plante the next season...<sup>4</sup>

The importance of agriculture, and Norwalk's suitability for it, are repeated throughout the next two hundred years. In 1731/2 Rev. Moses Dickinson wrote "The situation of this town is very agreeable, the soil fruitful yielding plenteously..."<sup>5</sup> Nearly 100 years later, the Rev. Timothy Dwight succinctly reiterated this when he wrote, "The soil of this township is excellent."<sup>6</sup> He further described the layout of the town, writing:

Few richer prospects of the same extend can be found than that which is presented from the neighboring eminences of their ground: the town built in its bosom with its cheerful spires, the river flowing through the middle, the farms on the bordering hills, the rich plain which skirts the Sound, and a train of islands fronting the mouth of the river...<sup>7</sup>

Dwight's distinction between the town in the river valley and the farms in the surrounding hills is important, because it demonstrates the land use pattern that marked the move from being a rural village into a nascent industrial city. Farming remained in the open space above the river, while the valley was beginning to fill with the growing town and a variety of mills.

<sup>2</sup> Tod Bryant, "Interview with Loretta Noonan Aboelnaga," July 17, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Wing Ray and Gloria P. Stewart, *Norwalk: Being an Historical Account of that Connecticut Town (Canaan, NH: Phoenix Publishing, 1979)*, p. 3-5

<sup>4</sup> Ray and Stewart, *Norwalk*, p.4. Other sources refer to this document as a petition for the establishment of the town.

<sup>5</sup> Extracts of the Prince Letters, *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society* (Hartford: 1860-1967), v.III, p. 313-315.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, ed. By Barbara Miller Solomon with the assistance of Patricia M. King, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 354.

<sup>7</sup> Dwight, 353-354. This text is quoted by John Warner Barber in *Connecticut Historical Collections* (New Have, Durrie & Peck and J.W.Barber, 1836), p. 390 in the 1849 "Improved Edition."

## 328 Flax Hill Road

The Main Homestead constructed ca. 1809 for Eliphalet Lockwood, the building was at the heart of one of the farms on the hills overlooking the community of Old Well, Later know as South Norwalk.<sup>9</sup> Lockwood's neighbors on Roton Hill were Raymonds and Boutons.<sup>10</sup> When it was first sold, the transaction from Eliphalet Lockwood to Nehemiah Hanford refers to both a "dwelling house and barn."<sup>11</sup>

The four families mentioned in the early transactions – Lockwood, Raymond, Bouton (a descendant would own land in the proposed district in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and Hanford – had all settled in Norwalk by 1670.<sup>12</sup> Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Norwalk's population had at its core descendants of the town's earliest proprietors.

328 Flax Hill Road would remain a farm for much of the next 200 years. In some cases, such as when 328 Flax Hill Road was rented for \$600 annually in 1865, the connection to agriculture is unmistakable. In addition to getting use of the land, Albert and Carrie Dakin received use of:

Farming utensils, stock, growing crops thereon, with the horse harness, wagons, and carts used by the present occupants...<sup>13</sup>

The 1880 probate inventory of Alexander Lauder, a subsequent owner, confirms this by listing many farming implements, 180 bushels of corn, hay and 75 chickens.<sup>14</sup> As Nils Kerschus points out, the three primary owners of the property in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were listed as residing in New York City when they purchased the land, so it may have been let out to tenant farmers (as it was when the Dakins lived there).<sup>15</sup>

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the connection between the property and farming is less clearly documented. However, the oral history of farming continuing on the property into the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with the physical evidence of the barns and chicken coops documented during a 1996 survey of the property demonstrate the active agricultural life of the property well into its second century.<sup>16</sup>

Loretta Noonan Aboelnaga, who lived at Fodor Farm for much of her early life and referred to both John and George Fodor as uncles, remembered life on the property during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

We started the day doing chores and I helped to take care of the animals on the farm. They had chickens, pigs, rabbits, guinea hens, sheep, rams, cows and bulls. I even got a horse for my birthday one year. We called it "Thunderbolt."<sup>17</sup>

Ms. Aboelnaga was also clear about the nature of the place:

It was definitely a working farm. They sold milk, eggs, and lambs that I can remember. People also used to come to us for well water. All the fields in back were either for hay or pasture for the animals. There was a huge garden with every kind of vegetable you can think of. I'm not sure if he sold any of that, though. He gave a lot of it away. This went on until 1973 but George kept a few animals until just before he died in 1990.

Ms. Aboelnaga's reminiscences make it clear that Fodor Farm remained just that, a working farm in the heart of Fairfield County's small cities and bedroom communities long into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>9</sup> These dates are based on title searches performed by Nils Kerschus. A thorough examination of the interior of the buildings was not possible at the time of this report.

<sup>10</sup> Title search.

<sup>11</sup> *Norwalk Land Records* Book 22, p21.

<sup>12</sup> Ray, p. 14,17,18,19.

<sup>13</sup> *Norwalk Land Records* Book 46, p 96

<sup>14</sup> Kerschus report, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Kerschus report, n.p.

<sup>16</sup> Tod Bryant, "Interview with Loretta Noonan Aboelnaga," July 17, 2006

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