

Illinois Times, November 24 – December 1, 1999

Hawthorne Place: The story of Springfield's first planned Twentieth-Century Subdivision

By Edward Russo

A century ago Springfield was a town on the move. Its population would increase nearly 50 percent in the first decade of the new century, reaching over 50,000 by 1910. Citizens and town boosters were confident of continued, unrestrained physical, population, and economic growth, which foreshadowed today's sprawling community.

Four "Grand" avenues – North, South, East (19th) and West (MacArthur), one mile from the center of town, were designated as city limits in 1855. By 1900, Springfield was spilling beyond these streets in all directions, but particularly to the south and west, something made possible largely by a system of street cars connecting outlying areas with downtown.

Until the late Nineteenth Century, cities were compact and dense places where people travelled by foot, where it was necessary to have work, shopping, and home as close together as possible. Only the wealthy could live away from this congestion.

But this pattern altered radically by the late 1800s, literally turning American cities like Springfield inside out. Eventually the dominant economic, retail, commercial, and housing activities would be strongest at the edge, rather than the center. The coming of mule-and-horse-drawn street cars to Springfield in 1861 and electric cars in 1891 would allow residents to live away from the choking, smoke-laden urban air, dust, and dirt. This was the beginning of the long exodus from city to suburbs which continues today.

For more than fifty years, "Aristocracy Hill," a showy enclave surrounding the governor's Mansion, had ruled as Springfield's premier residential district. Abutting downtown on the south, Aristocracy Hill grew gradually noisier and busier as the commercial area expanded. By 1900, three large tracts of farmland east of Pasfield Street and south of South Grand Avenue (which already had a streetcar line) were being considered for new development.

That year, Springfield voters authorized the formation of a Pleasure Driveway and Park District whose board began immediately planning a series of Springfield parks where people could walk, ride in carriages, play tennis or go boating. The new park board's first project was an enlargement of a commercial venture called

Washington Park, which had consisted of a few acres inside the present park featuring cement duck ponds and concession stands. The new park (reached by streetcar) was designed by O. C. Simonds, a nationally-known landscape architect who enhanced the acres of wood and stream with carriage drives, rustic bridges and large pond.

Completed in 1902, the park was a phenomenal success and visitors nearly overran the place, seeking out this sylvan paradise to escape the noise, dirt, and coal dust of town. Soon they were also seeking places to live closeby.

One of the first businessmen to act on this potential was William H. Conkling, who developed Hawthorne Place, a stylish new subdivision south of South Grand, east of MacArthur.

Much of the land in the immediate area was still farmland or woods. But South Grand had become a tree-shaded, paved boulevard with a street-car line to the new park and built up with large homes as far out as Spring Street and even beyond. Conkling's father, William J. Conkling, had purchased about forty acres there in the 1860s from Dr. William Wallace, Abraham Lincoln's brother-in-law. Wallace, in a fit of over-anticipation, observing the development of the mule-drawn South Fifth streetcar line to South Grand, platted Wallace's Addition on the exact site of the future Hawthorne Place.

One street (about where Lowell Avenue is today) entered from South Grand (then a dirt lane) and lots ranged in size from two to nearly six acres each. These small rural estates would be only a short eight-to-ten block walk to the streetcar line. This bracing daily constitutional proved too much even for the hardy Victorians, who stayed away in droves. William J. Conkling bought the ghost subdivision and quickly reconverted it to farmland.

But a generation later, with the pressure of a growing population and expanding physical city, Conkling the younger convinced his father that now was the time to open a new development. Along with two partners, Loren Wheeler (a future mayor and congressman) and John C. Pierik, the junior Conkling purchased the forty acres and some adjoining frontage, on which they planned a high-toned, literary-theme subdivision. The men aimed their development toward well-to-do buyers such as those who might be considering leaving the increasingly crowded Aristocracy Hill.

No coldly appraising bankers had to approve the loan to fund their project. Instead William J. Conkling gave his son and partners a mortgage for \$39,000 with which they were able to lay out streets and install every modern improvement. The subdivision was named for Nathaniel Hawthorne, and had streets honoring John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, the development was referred to as "poets' corner of Springfield" by one newspaper.

Wheeler soon sold his interest to Conkling and Pierik, who continued the development. Newspaper ads in the spring and summer of 1902 ballyhooed Hawthorne. Typical ads stressed Hawthorne's convenience and modernity, coupled with a not-so-subtle snob appeal. "Some people," said one, "may say it is a little too far out. This is nonsense. It is only seven minutes' ride from the square on street cars ... we have laid out our plans to make this the choicest Residence property in Springfield."

HAWTHORNE PLACE: MODERN RESIDENCE PROPERTY.

Everyone compliments the manner in which we are improving this property within 800 feet of Washington Park Boulevard. Sewers, Gas, Electric Light (in the alleys), Water, Granitoid Walks, Cement Curbs and Gutters, all streets boulevarded [paved], shade trees on every lot no dust.

No noise. Every comfort and convenience. Two [street] car lines running direct to our property.

An unwritten but implied code for this "restricted" district, as practiced then, meant no African-Americans and very few Jewish families were allowed in.

Hawthorne Place was a Springfield version of the great private street developments like Lennox Place, Hortense Place, Portland Place, and others then being built in cities like St. Louis' Central West End with their guarded, gated entrances. Residents owned the streets and had veto power to keep out "undesirables." While far more modest than these, Hawthorne was still built to provide as much privacy as was socially acceptable in a smaller community.

Hawthorne's streets were set off-axis from those north of South Grand and at the time they dead-ended into farmland at Laurel. Cedar, the only east-west street in Hawthorne, ended at Holmes. Just to the west was Gehlman and Turner's subdivision which had opened about 1890, aimed at low-end buyers seeking inexpensive housing beyond the city limits. Its narrow lots, lack of paving and utility connections meant slow sales until these improvements were added.

But some Gehlman and Turner residents were outraged to discover they would not have access to the pretentious new Hawthorne neighborhood and made formal complaint to the City Council. The Council took the matter under advisement, sending a committee out to look over the situation. Councilmen agreed with Conkling and Pierik's argument that, "to allow general traffic from the mud streets of the other addition would ruin their [Hawthorne's] paved streets."

In May 1902, one paper reported that, at the new subdivision "There are thirty-two teams now at work hauling gravel and cinders to Hawthorne Place for building cement walks and gutters and an army of men are busy laying them." When complete, the reporter grandly envisioned that;

Those who drive along South Grand Avenue for pleasure will find that pleasure greatly enhanced by turning aside into Hawthorne Place and taking a spin over its beautiful avenues. It is a visible exemplification of the spirit of progress which is to make the nineteenth century the record breaker of the ages and which is to set the pace for a higher standard of civic beauty and domestic comfort.

Hawthorne soon filled with middle-and upper-middle class Springfield and a sprinkling of inherited wealth and self-made industrialists and businessmen. Typical of these early residents was H. O. Barnes who recalled about fifty years later:

About 1907 or 1908 we met Mr. Will Conkling who for some reason became interested in us. He proposed to us that he would build us an eight-room home in a section of the city known as Hawthorne, on terms of installment payments for both land and the house It was a lovely home, and there was my darling Pearl ensconced as queen. We had a lovely fireplace – and she and I would sit of wintry evenings with hickory wood fires There are just two times in my life when I was more proud than all the others: one was the time when I walked with my darling by my side in Old Orleans on our wedding trip; the other is the first time I walked along Holmes Avenue with my little boy in his baby carriage.

The ugly side of housing segregation patterns was also well illustrated in Hawthorne. William Florville, Jr., son of Abraham Lincoln's friend and barber, was a wealthy black carpenter in Springfield. With a cynical but perfect understanding of social conditions, Florville purchased a Hawthorne lot from an investor who was leaving town. "The developers were outraged," says Springfield Race Riot scholar Roberta Senechal, "but they had no choice but to buy the property back from Florville, at a substantially higher price."

Inevitably Hawthorne knockoffs soon appeared. Real estate developer Albert S. Spaulding was a short, intense man obsessed with promoting his numerous subdivisions. He began quietly buying all the land he could south of Laurel near Hawthorne, and there opened a series of subdivisions with suspiciously-familiar names such as Hawthorne Hill, Holmes Place, and Whittier Place. Spaulding ads all stressed the advantage of proximity to Hawthorne. "Buy Cheap Holmes Place, Near Dear [expensive] Hawthorne Place" screamed one in big, bold lettering. He made a killing offering smaller lots, minimal landscaping, and fewer amenities.

The original Hawthorne opened in that first rush by the middle class to suburban living, but its developers and residents clearly saw it as an urban place, especially in its emphasis on modern conveniences, public utilities, and paved streets. Even the name, Hawthorne Place, with all streets being called avenues, has an urban sound to it.

Suburbanization took on a more playfully rural cast as time passed and development leap-frogged further west. Shortly the old Leland farm was developed into subdivisions with names like Oak Knolls, Leland Knolls, and Wildwood-- some streets appended with "Road" and "Lane" – all suggesting a countrified atmosphere far from the city.

The grid street plan of places like Hawthorne gave way to winding, curved roads meant to suggest parklike drives. One of Hawthorne's earliest competitors was Orendorff Place, immediately south of Washington Park, which offered at least one self-consciously curved road contrasting with its otherwise grid plan. And of course the thousands of new subdivisions which mushroomed since World War II were just a continuation of this outward growth.

In the meantime the once-distinctive Hawthorne melded into surrounding neighborhoods growing up around it until, by the mid-Twentieth Century, most people no longer recognized it as a separate place or even knew its name. And, as if history repeated itself, in the 1970s a new far-west-side subdivision on Washington Street Road opened, named, of all things, Hawthorne Place. With a kind of collective amnesia Springfield people didn't notice that there already *was* a Hawthorne Place – including residents of the original Hawthorne.

Despite the commercialization of the South Grand/MacArthur area, which informally came to be called "the strip," the original Hawthorne remained a placid island amidst a sea of change. Its beautiful shade trees and well-cared-for houses brought new generations of people wanting to live here. A new neighborhood association sponsored Hawthorne's first public garden tour in 1999. Expanded to garden and house tours, the proceeds paid for signs to mark the subdivision for the first time in its century long history. Hawthorne residents' concerted efforts have brought this model residential area once more back in the public eye.