

Elmhurst-Corona, 1652-1960

Free and enslaved labor created the agrarian landscape that sustained Elmhurst-Corona for its first two hundred years and is still discernible on its map today. A product of glacial deposit, the area in the early 1600s contained wooded upland, swamp, freshwater streams, salt meadow, wild strawberries, and game, fish, and shellfish. In 1652 English farmers from New England crossed Long Island Sound, ascended the Flushing River, and traveled up Horse Creek. At the center of present-day Elmhurst they established "the New Town." (An earlier settlement to the south in Maspeth had been evacuated during Dutch-Indian conflict in the 1640s.) Farms and pasture surrounding Newtown village were cleared, a watering pond and gristmill created, and wheat and food crops planted. Soon barreled flour and meat were marketed in the port of New York and exported to Europe and to the southern and Caribbean plantation colonies.¹

The 250 English settlers were Puritan Congregationalists who governed their affairs by town meeting. After the British crown replaced Dutch rule in 1664, a larger township was created by uniting Newtown village with "the out-plantations." These farms along the Queens shore facing Manhattan had been settled as early as 1638, and extended through present-day Long Island City and Astoria to La Guardia airport. Mainly Dutch, but including Swedish, German, French, and English settlers, the out-plantation farmers now traveled to Newtown village to register land transactions, attend the yearly town meeting, and participate in annual "Training Day" militia ceremonies. By 1700 the Newtown village population had also gained one Italian and a few French, Welsh, and Danish farmers, and a tailor, carpenter, cooper, and blacksmith who were granted house plots.

Native American Munsee had previously used the Newtown vicinity for hunting, but their claims were bought out in 1666. Some reappeared late in the cen-

tury as wolf bounty hunters on lands to be cleared for farming. A few other Indians from southern colonies were among the slaves of Newtown farmers. In 1708 an enslaved Indian man and black woman murdered their out-plantation owners when they were denied the customary Sunday freedom other Newtown slaves enjoyed; the pair was publicly executed in Jamaica, the county seat. The last mention of an Indian slave in the area was in the 1720s.

Africans arrived as enslaved laborers with the European farmers, and property transactions involving them were long noted in Newtown records. By 1700 the township population included one thousand whites and one hundred blacks. Like the Europeans, the Africans were of diverse cultural and linguistic roots. By the 1750s nearly one-quarter of Newtown township's 1,400 residents were black, and in 1790 blacks accounted for 28 percent of the 2,100 residents.

White and black men did farm labor, cleared swamps, and transported flour and market produce by wagon. Roads connected Newtown village southwest to Brooklyn and the ferry to Manhattan, and northwest to the out-plantations and a second Manhattan ferry in today's Astoria. Other roads ran southeast to Jamaica, north to a wool fulling mill on Long Island Sound, and east to Flushing. White and black women did housework, spun wool from local sheep and cotton imported from the Caribbean, wove cloth, and performed garden and occasional farm work.

By the 1720s families had multiplied, land prices had risen, and cultivation had expanded throughout the township (which comprised today's Maspeth, Middle Village, Ridgewood, Glendale, Rego Park, Forest Hills, Corona, East Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, and Woodside). Farms now passed to a single heir; other sons pioneered new agrarian settlements elsewhere or moved to Manhattan for careers in commerce or the professions. Marriage ties knit together the two dozen Newtown families who remained landowners between 1698 and 1790. By the late 1700s these included English-Dutch marriages in increasing number.

The prosperity of the 1720s and onward was evident in the oak frame, shingled homes that replaced earlier stone and thatch cottages, in imported and locally manufactured furnishings and clothing purchased in Manhattan, and in the array of crops and livestock: corn, barley, rye, peas, potatoes, peaches, pears, "Newtown Pippin" apples, tobacco, cows, sheep, pigs, and chickens. A brick-works, tannery, starch factory, and brewery were established in Newtown village, and wheelwrights, saddlers, and weavers worked for hire. The school begun in 1684 had grown to five schools by the 1730s. In that decade new Dutch Reformed and Anglican houses of worship joined the former Congregational, now Presbyterian, church in Newtown village, and families from all over the township traveled there on Sundays.

British troops occupied Newtown between 1776 and 1783, and the population was forced to house and provision them. Several black residents escaped slavery during the Revolution, but manumissions in the decades before then were few

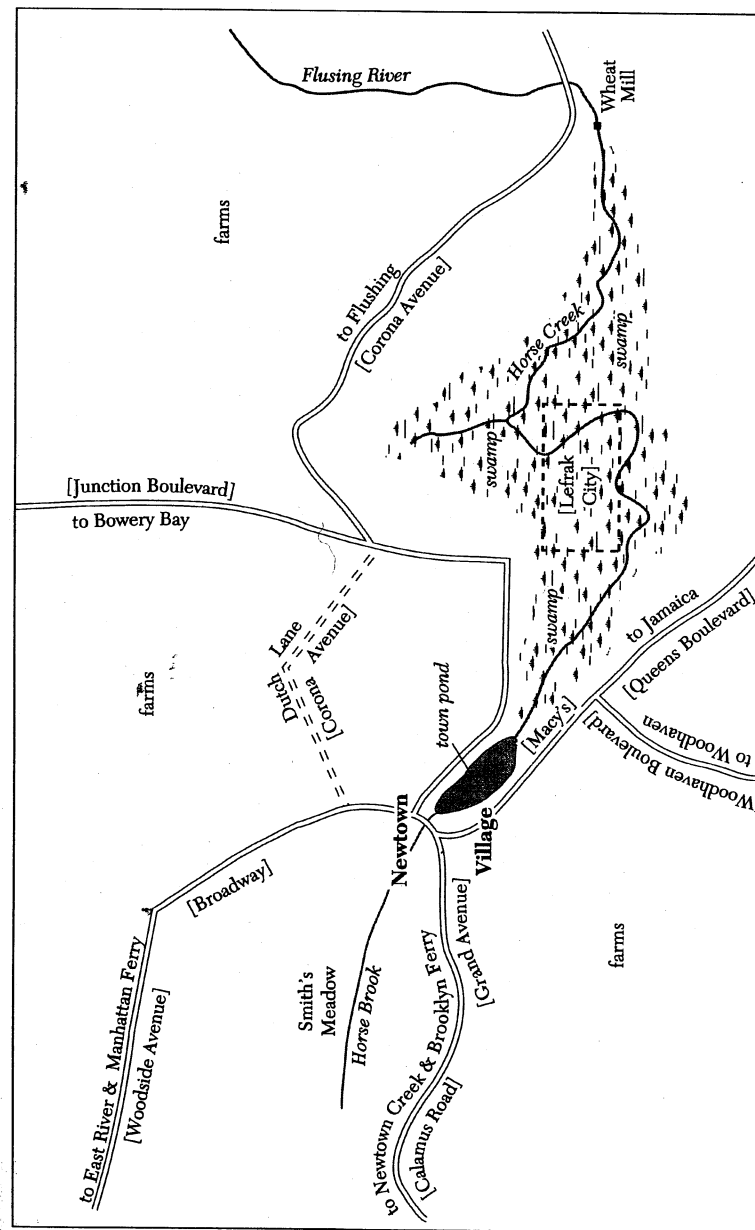


Figure 5. Colonial Newtown.

(one "free Negro" is mentioned in an account of a 1754 incident). A "gradual" phasing-out of slavery began in New York State in 1799. Persons born after that year were free but were required to serve "apprenticeships" with their owners until they reached age twenty-eight; in 1817 those born before 1799 were declared free as of July 4, 1827. Many black persons left surrounding rural areas for Manhattan during these years. Still, as late as the 1820s land-owner Richard Leverich, descendant of a 160-year-old Newtown family, rode to church with two black male slaves driving his carriage and two black female slaves seated behind.

By 1830 Newtown was changing. The township population had grown only slightly, to 2,600, but the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 reordered the local agricultural regime. With flour from upstate and the Midwest now arriving in New York City, Newtown farmers concentrated on truck gardening for the burgeoning Manhattan population. Over the next century they cash-cropped potatoes, corn, oats (for horse fodder), asparagus, peas, cabbage, turnips, carrots, tomatoes, watercress, fruits, and flowers. Some 75,000 yards of woolen cloth were still hand-produced in 1845, but sheep raising was in decline. Dairy production, however, was increasing and lasted into the 1940s.

Newtown's farm labor force shifted from blacks, who by 1845 numbered only 375, to European immigrants, then already 1,950 in a population of 5,500. Germans were most numerous. A forerunner of larger numbers arriving from the 1840s onward, German immigrant Ascan Backus settled in Newtown in 1829. He leased and bought farms, and at his death in 1880 owned four hundred acres and employed more than a thousand farm workers. Backus attended Newtown's Dutch Reformed church, and his children mixed with offspring of the Rapelye, Lawrence, Moore, and other old families at the Newtown Academy. Many Germans, however, were Roman Catholics, and in 1854 St. Mary's parish, one mile from Newtown village, was organized, with German priests serving through the 1880s. In 1874 a short-lived German-language newspaper was begun by the American publisher of the township's *Newtown Register*.

The Germans settled into local life and operated a growing number of village stores. So did Irish immigrants, including William O'Gorman, Newtown's town clerk in the 1880s. In 1869 a mainly Irish Our Lady of Sorrows parish was organized in Corona, and in 1891 a Polish St. Adalbert's parish in Elmhurst. Beyond farm work, immigrant laborers found employment in the massive cemeteries created in the township after Manhattan banned burials in 1850, and in the new factories and oil refineries along the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) lines, on Newtown Creek separating Queens and Brooklyn, and in Long Island City, which seceded from Newtown township in 1870.

Newtown village's male gentry, both the well-educated scions of old families and Manhattan business commuters with homes "in the country," disdained the "foreigners . . . coming over by the thousands." In the 1880s they formed a Newtown Law and Order Society to press for enforcement of laws banning recreation and drinking on Sundays. In fact, German and Irish baseball enthusiasm,

beer-garden and saloon patronage, and public urination resembled the horse racing, drunkenness at funerals, and boisterous Training Day revelry that had marked old Newtown into the 1850s.

That way of life, however, had begun to fade with a "plank road" turnpike to Brooklyn in 1852 and the arrival of the LIRR in 1854. By then, elite offspring of Newtown landowners had moved to New York City, and numbered a Manhattan district attorney, an Anglican bishop of New York State, presidents of the New York Medical Society and Columbia College, and a U.S. senator. As carriage-to-ferry travel time dropped, life in "country seats," with farmland increasingly worked by immigrant managers, became more attractive.

Charles Leverich moved from Newtown to Manhattan to begin his commercial career in 1827, but after becoming a bank director in 1840 he built a large home near the family estate. He commuted during the following decades while he invested in southern cotton plantations, helped broker \$150 million in loans to the Lincoln government to finance the Civil War, and became president of the Bank of New York in 1863. Country life also attracted Manhattan businessman Samuel Lord (of Lord & Taylor) to Newtown village in 1840. In the 1850s he built and sold six mansions on his holdings next to the new railroad station.

Near a second LIRR stop, entrepreneurs sold "Corona" house lots, and by the 1870s another colony of commuters had sprung up there. This area had already drawn Manhattan and Brooklyn amusement seekers to its picnic groves and a large race track that flourished in the 1850s and 1860s. In 1869 banker Leverich endowed a picturesque nondenominational chapel (still standing in 1998) in Corona village, and a memorial service was held there when he died in 1876.

A bucolic life of country homes, elm- and cherry-lined lanes, sleigh rides, and first-name friendliness flourished among Newtown's well-to-do in the 1860s and 1870s. The arrival of fixed-rail horsecar lines to the Brooklyn and Manhattan ferries in 1876, however, and then trolleys in the 1890s, increased the appeal of the area to upper-middle-class commuters. Beginning in 1896 the Cord Meyer family, children of a German immigrant industrialist, transformed farmland north of Newtown village into the more densely populated "Elmhurst," a 1,700-lot tract of elegant six- to ten-room detached homes and rowhouses. Professionals, middle managers in the growing number of Manhattan corporations, and a colony of "theater folk" moved in. "Restrictions" applied: no Jews and no blacks.

African Americans continued to dwindle in number, and many of those remaining in Newtown village worked for wealthy white families, but their sense of local rootedness was strong. In 1862, in response to President Lincoln's request for the views of "colored" Americans about possible "resettlement" overseas, black Newtown residents affirmed, "We love this land, and contributed our share to its prosperity and wealth . . . by cutting down forests, subduing the soil, cultivating fields, [and] constructing roads."

Rigid segregation nonetheless marked local social life. The first black juror was called only in 1883, and a segregated school for the handful of Newtown vil-

lage black children existed until 1884. African American community life revolved around a church on the village outskirts. It housed black Presbyterians, then Methodists, and finally a small African Methodist Episcopal congregation organized in the early 1900s. With few members still residing in Elmhurst, it relocated in 1929 to the expanding North Corona black community that had emerged in the early 1900s.

Between 1880 and 1900 the population of Elmhurst and Corona grew from 1,250 to 4,400. The heart of old Newtown village remained a service center for the rural economy with stores selling seeds, hardware, provisions, and hay and oats for livestock. A score of other villages and railroad hamlets now filled the rest of the township, and during these two decades the total population quadrupled from 10,000 to 40,000. In 1886 the North Beach amusement park, a rival to Coney Island, opened on the site of today's La Guardia airport; a trolley line through Newtown village to North Beach operated until the park closed in 1919.

Around the elite and upper-middle-class Elmhurst and Corona commuter enclaves, the working- and lower-middle-class community that would flourish between 1900 and 1960 was already emerging. Immigrant and second-generation Germans, Irish, and Poles continued to settle as farms were subdivided for housing. A Chinese laundry opened in Elmhurst in 1883. Beginning in the late 1880s, Italians moved in increasing numbers from Brooklyn and Manhattan to Corona Heights, south of the Corona LIRR station and village, where they bought land and built homes. An Italian Roman Catholic parish, St. Leo's, was established in 1903, although it was served by Irish priests until the 1940s. A number of Jewish immigrants also settled in Corona Heights along with the Italians.

Vestiges of rural Newtown still existed early in this century. Boys swam in Horse Creek and hunted muskrats in the surrounding swamp into the 1920s. Barges of horse manure for farmers arrived from Manhattan on the Corona bank of the Flushing River. A fox was killed in fields just north of Elmhurst as land was being "improved" for housing. The death knell for old Newtown, however, had rung in 1900 when the New York City Council approved construction of the Queensborough Bridge.

That structure opened in 1909, and trolley lines over it connected Elmhurst-Corona to Manhattan for a single fare. Queens factory production boomed, as did housing demand and land prices. Developers and businessmen formed a Queens Chamber of Commerce in 1910 to press for transit extensions to their urbanizing borough. In 1912 the LIRR was connected by tunnel to the new Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan. The elevated Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT) arrived in Elmhurst and Corona in 1917, and the underground Independent (IND) subway in Elmhurst during 1933-1936. The IRT in Elmhurst was built on empty land along newly created Roosevelt Avenue, but in Corona forty homes had to be condemned. Excavation for the IND necessitated destruction of most of the old buildings in Newtown village.

These transportation developments led to intensification of residential land

use. Single- and multiple-family homes, rowhousing, and by the 1920s five- and six-story apartments replaced existing structures, including most of the Cord Meyer homes in Elmhurst. Laborers, operatives, skilled artisans, clerical workers, city employees, small business proprietors, and the clergy, doctors, lawyers, and real estate agents serving them increasingly dominated the scene. During the booming 1920s Elmhurst jumped from 15,000 to 28,000 residents, and Corona (including the portion now in Community District 3) from 27,000 to 61,000.

Many of Elmhurst-Corona's conspicuous architectural features date to the two pre-1929 decades: the 230-foot-tall Elmhurst gas tanks (built in 1910 and 1921—and torn down in 1996), 200-foot-wide Queens Boulevard (1914), the block-long Newtown High School addition (1922), the Elmhurst Masonic Temple (1923), the Elks' Club Lodge (1924), the American Legion Hall (1926), William Moore Park commemorating Corona's first World War I casualty (1929), and several churches and public and parochial schools. Movies also arrived, the first theater opening in Corona in 1910 and in Elmhurst in 1916. During these years, 6:00 A.M. whistles from several large factories started the day for male and female workers. And the aroma from Durkee's spice and condiments plant in Elmhurst, which opened in 1917 and employed three hundred women, pervaded the area.

Neighborhood memories of older persons still living in the 1980s dated to these years. The Zaccarias arrived in Corona from Italy in 1912. Husband and wife both worked as their seven children grew up: he in Corona and Flushing factories, later as a window washer, and finally in his own laundry delivery service; she at home making paper flowers, on a truck farm, and in one of the many Jewish-owned garment shops located in Corona from the 1890s on. The German-Austrian Tilitz family moved from Manhattan to Astoria and then to Elmhurst, neighborhoods where the father worked as a baker. His son Bob recalled a farm down the block when they arrived in Elmhurst in 1917, and horses stabled across the street. When he began college in 1927, Bob Tilitz took the Queens Boulevard trolley from Elmhurst across the Queensborough Bridge and then transferred to a Bronx-bound subway. (The trolley ended service in 1937, put out of business by the IND.)

In the 1930s one of the few remaining members of the old elite registered her snobbish opinion: "The neighborhood isn't what it used to be, anyway. It has gone through a transition that's not for the better." New housing continued to rise during the Depression decade though at a slower pace; Elmhurst-Corona increased by only one-third the number of new residents it had added during the 1920s. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, all the residential streets were paved, and new factories and businesses appeared, including what was reputed to be the nation's largest drive-in restaurant: Howard Johnson's on Queens Boulevard with its famous "28 Flavors" of ice cream.

At the end of the 1930s CD4 lost the forty-foot-high "Corona dumps," the

mounds of Brooklyn ashes and garbage carted after 1910 to the salt meadow bordering the Flushing River. The location of Wilson's garage in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, this odiferous landfill had been a haven to mosquitoes and rats. In 1939 the futuristic New York World's Fair opened on this site, giving Elmhurst-Corona residents a glimpse of technological marvels that World War II delayed until the 1950s and 1960s. When the fair closed, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park replaced it and provided much appreciated recreational space.

World War II restrictions on residential construction ended in 1947, and housing activity resumed. Many remaining open sites in CD4 had been filled in by the 1950s. New apartments appeared, as did more Jewish residents and a synagogue: Temple Emanu-el opened in Elmhurst in 1949. More Italians also moved to Elmhurst, from both Corona and elsewhere. During the 1940s and 1950s the family of Antonin Scalia—President Ronald Reagan's 1986 Supreme Court appointee—lived in Elmhurst, where "Nino," still remembered by some, went to school and joined a local Boy Scout troop. The center of the Horse Creek swamp was occupied by temporary veterans' housing from 1947 to 1954. Apartment construction began there later, and the large Lefrak City rental complex opened in 1962.

Civic involvement has a long history in Elmhurst-Corona. Colonial Newtown was governed by town meeting, though as elsewhere only white, male property owners voted. Ordinances affecting quality-of-life issues were enacted and enforced by citizen officials. In 1662 the town voted "that whosoever has cats or dogs or hogs lying dead in any place to offend their neighbors they must either bury them or throw them into the creek." Annual town meetings continued until 1898, when Queens joined "Greater New York City."

As their numbers and their stake in local affairs increased, the out-plantation Dutch established their own church in English-dominated Newtown village in 1730. In 1828 black freedmen formed a United African Association to administer their church and cemetery. Later, German, Irish, Polish, and Italian immigrants organized not only religious congregations but ethnic associations. These ranged from a German men's chorus in Corona Heights (until World War I) to Italian Charities of America, a service organization formed by Queens residents of Italian ancestry in 1936 and since 1950 headquartered in Elmhurst.

Facing a growing immigrant population in nineteenth-century Newtown, the old English-Dutch elite created their own associations. The Wandowenock Volunteer Fire Company began in 1843, composed of men from landowning families; only in the 1880s did German and Irish names appear on its roster. Members of established families also founded the Newtown Library Association in 1845 and a Masonic Lodge in 1873. These same Newtown "farmers and citizens" appealed unsuccessfully to the state legislature in 1855 to close the Corona racetrack; they sought to prevent the "gambling, drunkenness, profanity and . . .

rowdyism" they predicted would accompany its Brooklyn and Manhattan patrons and investors.

In 1892 a short-lived United Improvement Association of Corona was formed by 125 male residents to bring sidewalks and streetlights to their village; the membership list comprised English, Dutch, German, Irish, and a few Italian and Jewish names. After the end of home rule in 1898, civic associations arose to lobby New York City officials on issues affecting their areas. In 1916 Elmhurst and Corona civic groups formed a Roosevelt Avenue Rapid Transit Committee to monitor IRT construction, and a Newtown Taxpayers Association flourished in the 1920s. The South Elmhurst United Civic Association pressed for better municipal services during the 1930s, and in the 1940s it joined the Corona Civic Association to demand that the name of the new park on the World's Fair site be amended to Flushing Meadows-Corona Park. Civic leaders were usually also members of the political party clubs, business associations, and fraternal, religious, and service organizations that flourished in Elmhurst-Corona between 1900 and 1960.

Public rituals also marked the area's long history. After the Training Day festivities of the colonial and national periods ended, a more solemn Memorial Day featured processions of Civil War veterans and children carrying flowers to the gravesites of Newtown men killed in that struggle. Rituals to mark the departure of local men, and then to commemorate those who died, accompanied and followed both world wars. Fourth of July crowds gathered by the thousands for band concerts and fireworks in Corona's Linden Park beginning in 1910. Ceremonies marked the opening of the Corona IRT station and the many public buildings erected in the 1920s. And in Elmhurst a large Christmas tree appeared in front of the Durkee's factory.

European immigration largely halted after 1924, and the working- and lower-middle-class Elmhurst-Corona of the 1950s was the culmination of its immigrant history begun a century earlier. More family members now went to college, but with rising incomes, veterans' housing benefits, and massive federal highway construction, many also were attracted to the suburbs, especially those farther out on Long Island. Family roots remained in CD4, but branches were increasingly far-flung. While still amounting to 98 percent of the 1960 census count, the neighborhood's white population numbers were beginning to contract.