



How Lawrence Township Became a Suburb



This 1963 photo of central Lawrence shows the new subdivisions of Nassau Estates, Norgate, Nassau II, University Park, and Pine Knoll.

In the late 19th century, Trenton was a vibrant manufacturing center in steel, rubber, and ceramics. Trenton's factories grew out from the city along the Delaware and Raritan Canal; this growth made it possible for workers to live in south Lawrence and walk to work in north Trenton.

In the 1880 census the population of Lawrence was just over 3,000, much of it in working-class suburbs along the Trenton border. In 1882 the citizens there decided to secede from Lawrence and become an independent municipality known as Millham Township. However, in 1888 Millham was annexed to Trenton, where it became the 8th Ward. By the 1890 census, Lawrence had lost over half of its population.

The rebuilding of suburban Lawrence began in 1890, when Joseph Slack and William Wood agreed to subdivide some of their farmland as home sites that would be within walking distance of north Trenton. This became Slackwood.

In 1899 two trolley lines began service between Lawrence and Trenton, eventually extending to Princeton. The Old Line followed Brunswick Avenue out of Trenton and then followed Lawrence Road through Lawrenceville village. The Johnson Line traveled further west across farm fields but ultimately arrived in the village as well.

For the first two decades of the 20th century these two trolley lines defined the suburban geography of Lawrence. Three neighborhoods developed during this period. The first was the neighborhood between the two trolley lines, the area we today know as Eldridge Park.



Image courtesy of Lawrence Township Archives



LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

One of America's most successful real estate promoters at the turn of the century was a man from Boston called Jacob Wilbur. In 1906 Wilbur arrived in Lawrence and bought 42 acres from a south Lawrence farmer called Stephen Eldridge, and Eldridge Park was born.

Eldridge Avenue was laid out as a straight line—two-thirds of a mile long—with the Johnson Trolley at one end and Lawrence Road at the other. Wilbur followed this with Trenton Terrace, which evolved into Eggerts Crossing. He then subdivided Lawn Park and filled in the gap between Eldridge and Lawn Park with Ridgemont.

The second neighborhood to be developed was along Brunswick Avenue—providing trolley access but also within walking distance of many of the factories of north Trenton.

Another New England real estate promoter called Benjamin Miller formed the Colonial Land Company, which in 1917 acquired its first property in Lawrence—most of the 35-acre tract along the D&R Canal north of the Trenton border and south of Cherry Tree Lane. This became Colonial Heights.

It was followed by the section of Lawrence across Brunswick Avenue from Trenton. The land north of Spruce Street and south of Mulberry was known as Camp Donnelly. During the First World War it was used as a staging area for the 2nd regiment of the NJ National Guard, and after the war became popular as a campsite for traveling carnivals and circuses. But in 1922 it was sold and subdivided as Brunswick Terrace.

The final area that emerged prior to the arrival of the automobile was the Lawrence Road Corridor, which hugged 206 along the Old Line trolley. Oaklyn Realty was created in 1911 to develop the 80-acre farm of J Henry Darrah, to be called Darramoore. Activity along the Lawrence Road stretched almost to what is today Rider University. There Lombard Terrace was bounded on the south by Five Mile Run and on the north by Skillman Avenue.

By 1920 the population of Lawrence had managed to climb back to where it had been before the secession of Millham forty years previously. The first subdivision of the new automotive age in Lawrence was Colonial Lakelands. The Colonial Land Company constructed a 500-foot dam across the Shabakunk Creek to create Colonial Lake and adjacent parkland for the exclusive use of residents.

The 1920s also saw further development along the Lawrence Road corridor which had become part of the Lincoln Highway, at that time one of New Jersey's finest roads. In 1927 developer Samuel Hilton bought the 100-acre farm of Charles Smith, which stretched from Lawrence Road to Princeton Pike. This was to become Lawrentonia.

The 1920s saw Lawrence take another big jump in population, to over 6,000, but with the stock market crash, the Great Depression, and World War II, the US housing industry entered its dark ages. In Lawrence, this meant that most of the subdivided land that had not yet been sold and built upon in 1930—and that still was most of the land—remained unsold until after 1945.

In the decade of the Great Depression, Lawrence mirrored the rest of the country. There was no growth. However, several changes were already underway that would have a big effect on how Lawrence grew after the war.

First, Trenton was already in decline as a manufacturing center; in 1932 Roebing's work force was half of what it once had been. The future of job growth in Trenton would be in government and in services.

A second development involved infrastructure. In 1926, Lawrence reached an agreement with Trenton to allow expansion of Trenton's sewer system into south Lawrence. In 1930 Lawrence also passed its first zoning ordinance in an effort to channel different kinds of development to different parts of town.

Finally, on the national scene, in 1933 the first 30-year fixed-rate mortgage came on the market and in 1934 the Federal Housing Administration was created. The GI Bill came ten years later.

In the decade after the Second World War, Lawrence began growing again, adding 2,000 residents between 1940 and 1950. Most of this new population moved into the subdivisions that had been created prior to the war. The first major new subdivision of the postwar period came in 1950 with Lakedale, which filled in the land east of Colonial Lakelands toward the D&R Canal.

By 1947 it had become clear that the Trenton sewer system would not be sufficient to handle the growing population in the suburbs. Lawrence and Ewing teamed up to create the Ewing Lawrence Sewerage Authority, which built its plant off Whitehead Road and began providing service to the southern part of the township in 1953.

The early 1950s also saw construction of a new transportation artery, the Trenton Freeway, which opened as far as Strawberry Street at the Trenton border in 1953 and all the way to Whitehead Road in 1955.

This infrastructure development set the stage for Lawrence's first "big bang." In the decade beginning with 1956, over 1,000 new homes were built, mostly in central Lawrence. The single-year record was 229 in 1959, a record that would stand until the 1970s.

The new subdivisions featured bigger lots. In Nassau Estates, typical lots were 7,000 square feet, but by the time Nassau II rolled around a few years later, many lot sizes had grown to 15,000 square feet. Compared with pre-war Cape Cods and bungalows, these were ranches, split levels, and colonials. Reflecting changing demographics, developers were no longer looking to build cheap houses for the working man, but something bigger, nicer, and more upscale.

Post-war growth in state government and service industries like health care was slowly turning Trenton into more of a white-collar town. By 1960 less than one-third of Trenton's workforce was still employed in manufacturing. Meanwhile in Lawrence the ETS campus opened in 1958 and the first freshman class at the new Rider College campus arrived in the autumn of 1959.

Nassau Estates occupied the tract on the northwest corner of Darrah Lane and Princeton Pike. Initial prices were \$13,990 for the ranch and \$15,990 for the split-level. Following on the heels of Nassau Estates was Norgate, which moved a bit further upmarket, with prices starting at \$18,100. The area north of Norgate and east of Princeton Pike began to be subdivided into Nassau II a year later.

And two years after that, Pine Knoll was opened on the west side of Princeton Pike, north of Nassau Estates and adjacent to the brand new Ben Franklin Elementary School. The arrival of Rider College on Lawrence Road led to a housing tract across the street called University Park. This was the only big central Lawrence subdivision that was not along Princeton Pike.

All of these new consumers attracted retail development, and Lawrence got its first shopping center right in the thick of it in 1960. This was the beginning of the end of Trenton as a shopping destination.

But not all development was in central Lawrence. In 1963 the

Image courtesy of Trenton Evening Times, May 23, 1952

PUBLIC NOTICE

Ewing-Lawrence Sewerage Authority

TO PROPERTY OWNERS IN EWING TOWNSHIP AND LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP:—

Please take notice that the following resolution has been adopted by the Ewing-Lawrence Sewerage Authority:

"RESOLVED that the Sewerage Authority adopt the following schedule of fees and policies for connections to the sewerage disposal system:

"All dwellings and other buildings in existence and on planned sewer lines on November 1, 1951, will receive a stub to the curb for a fee of seventy-five dollars (\$75.00) to be paid when the sewerage treatment plant is in operation and ready to take sewage from said lines.

"Owners of land on planned lines on which dwellings or other buildings are not in existence on November 1, 1951, may receive stubs to the curb when the sewer is being laid in front of said lands for a fee of seventy-five dollars (\$75.00) payable in advance on application therefor.

"After said sewer lines have been laid, owners will be charged a connection fee in accordance with the actual cost of putting in said connection but not less than one hundred and twenty-five dollars (\$125.00)."

Applications for stubs to vacant lots may be made at the office of the Authority at 146 West State Street, Trenton, New Jersey.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHORITY

W. F. Predhome, PFC, Secretary

The widespread availability of sewer hookups spurred housing development in the mid-1950s.

build-out of the Colonial Lake neighborhood was completed with the construction of Lake Park.

Several other subdivisions established beachheads in neighborhoods that would develop further in the 1970s and 1980s. One was the Federal City-Denow Corridor, close to the border of Hopewell Township. The first subdivision there was Twin Ponds Estates in 1961.

Another was the neighborhood surrounding Lawrenceville village. Sewer lines had been extended to the village in 1961 and in 1965

construction began on Academy Manor off Lawrenceville-Pennington Road.

The two decades from 1950 to 1970 saw Lawrence grow from just over 8,000 to almost 20,000 residents. But then population growth ground to a halt during the 1970s. In other respects, however, the township was changing in ways that would enable the addition of over 13,000 more residents in the decades after 1980.

In 1973, the Trenton Freeway was extended from Whitehead Road to its current terminus. And by 1974, the interchanges of the new highway called I-295 were open at 206, Princeton Pike, and Route 1. With the opening of I-295, Lawrence was no longer a suburb of Trenton or Princeton, but became a suburb of all of central New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania.

I-295 quickly became the de facto border between populated south Lawrence and rural north Lawrence. Of the 20,000 residents in 1980, almost all lived south of the highway, and the population of Lawrence south of I-95 has remained stable since then.

Meanwhile, in 1971 Squibb opened its 215-acre campus on Route 206. Its enormous work force stoked demand for places to live in Lawrence Township.

In the mid-1970s, two subdivisions were developed off Cold Soil Road, Lawrencewood and Woodlane Estates. And on Lawrenceville-Pennington Road, Lawrence's first townhouse subdivision, The Village, began selling units in 1978. The new trend in housing was the planned residential development, which combined multi-family and single-family homes within the same subdivision. Lawrence got its first planned residential development in 1978 with the 68-acre Sturwood Hamlet, which offered both single-family houses and townhouses.

By the end of the 1970s, the sewer lines connecting to the village area were at capacity. The taxpayers were in no mood to pay for expansion of sewer service, but eventually a group of housing developers agreed to pay for it. The Cold Soil Road pumping station increased capacity enough to support more than 1,000 additional housing units in the area.

There was also further development along the Federal City-Denow Corridor. This included Twin Meadows at Federal City and Bunker Hill. There was also more development closer to Princeton, including Foxcroft at Princeton Pike and Province Line Road.

The area of greatest growth in Lawrence in the late 20th century was near the intersection of Route 1 and Quakerbridge Road. For most of Lawrence's history, this area was zoned for commercial use, but in the 1980s it began to open up for residential construction with Lawrence Square Village on the eastern side of the Northeast Corridor railroad tracks. This was followed by Yorkshire Village behind the Mercer Mall and Liberty Green off Lawrence Station Road.

The 20th-century development of Lawrence into a suburb comprised three periods of strong growth interrupted by two plateaus of no growth. The first growth period was in south Lawrence from 1900-1930, followed by little growth due to depression and war.

The second growth period took place in central Lawrence from 1950-1970, but was followed by a plateau in the 1970s. Starting in the 1980s, the third period brought growth to north and east Lawrence, north of I-95 and east of Route 1. In the early 21st century, there is little land available for residential development, and Lawrence is not expected to grow much further.

SUBURBANIZATION OF LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP

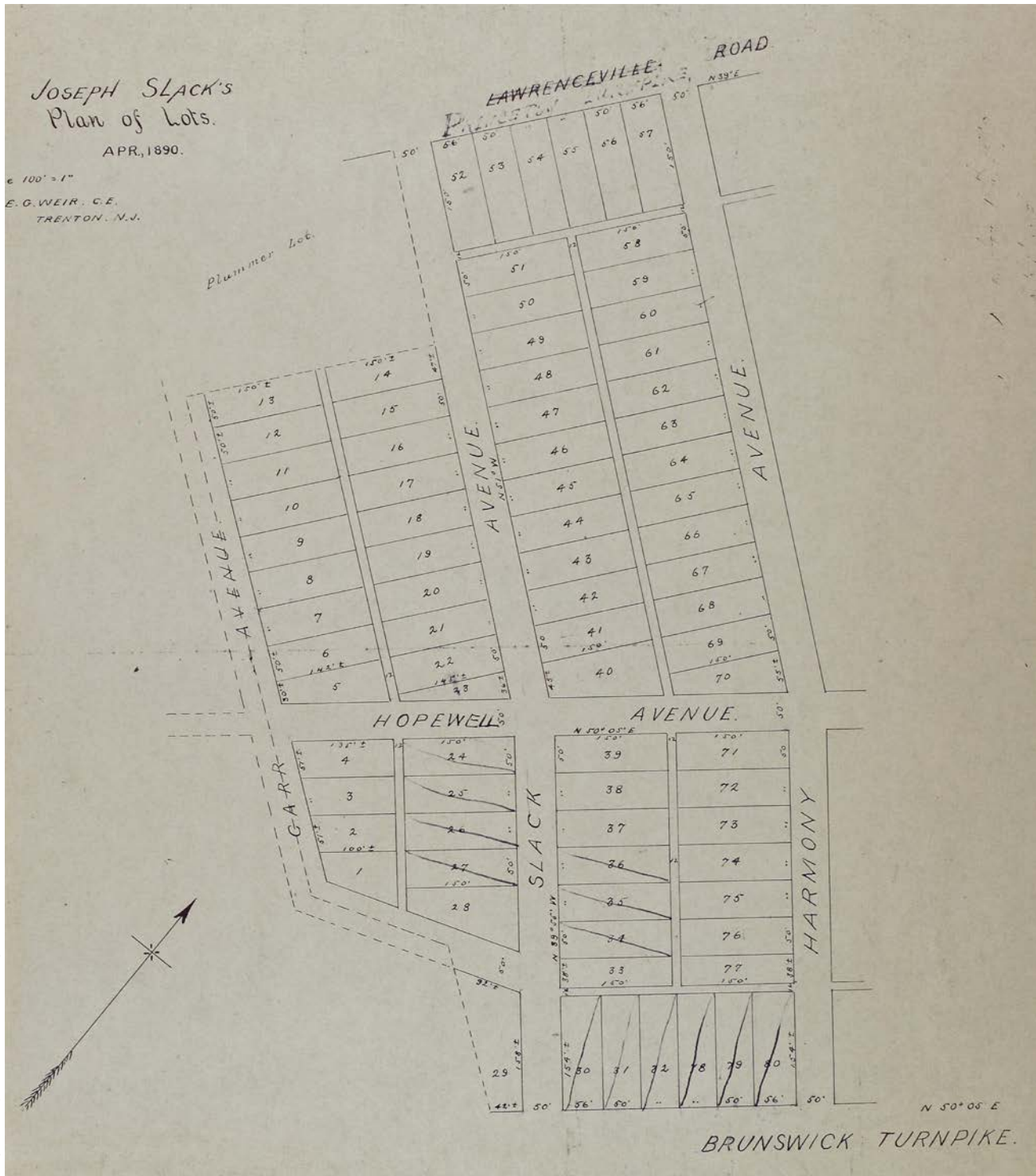


Image courtesy of Lawrence Township Engineer

The first subdivision in Lawrence came in 1890 when Joseph Slack and William Wood created Slackwood.

