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REAL ESTATE

If You're Thinking of Living In/Millburn Township, N.J.; A Town Where Both Halves Live Well

By JERRY CHESLOW JULY 16, 2000

Correction Appended

MILLBURN, N.J., is a township with a split personality. Its northern section, known as Short Hills, gives its name to an upscale shopping center, the Mall at Short Hills. The residential area of Short Hills is characterized by winding, hilly roads, bordered by thick stands of oaks. Behind them, often shielded from public view by sumptuous flower gardens, are some of the country's best examples of 19th-century residential architecture. The rest of the town, known as the Millburn section, is laid out more conventionally, with neat streets and a mixture of building styles -- small turn-of-the-century workers' houses, Victorians, Tudors, Cape Cods and 1950's ranches and colonials -- on smaller lots, some just 36 feet wide.

Millburn owes its name to Samuel Campbell, a Scottish immigrant who built a paper mill along the Rahway River in 1790, on what is now Brookside Drive. Using the Scottish term burn, which means stream, he called his factory the Mill-on-the-Burn, and that name was adapted to Millburn when the township split from neighboring Springfield in 1857.

But the municipality owes its character and its cachet to Stewart Hartshorn, inventor of the spring-loaded window shade. In 1877, when he was 37, Mr. Hartshorn bought up 1,550 acres in Millburn. Because of its undulating topography of low hills, none above 660 feet, the area was already known as "the short hills."

Seeking to establish an ideal community, Mr. Hartshorn sold plots of land to carefully screened buyers, vetting their home plans before signing over the deeds. He also hired some of the finest architects of his day, including Stanford White, to build more than 100 homes, which he sold or rented. Each Hartshorn house was situated on its own knoll. Rather than cutting through his hills, Mr. Hartshorn snaked his roads around them, detouring to avoid felling large trees. Because of his conservationist approach, the township has more than 1,000 trees that are over 200 years old, the largest being a red oak that's six feet in diameter on Great Oak Drive.

Mr. Hartshorn's legacy lives on in a local tree preservation ordinance, which requires property owners to get permits when felling any tree that is more than 22 inches thick or three trees with trunks thicker than four inches.

Millburn's housing stock ranges from multimillion dollar mansions in the Short Hills section to small colonials near Millburn Avenue, the spine of the turn-of-the-century downtown. Some of the most expensive homes are in the two historic districts -- Short Hills Park, built by Mr. Hartshorn near the center of town, and the Wyoming section, laid out in 1872 in the southeastern section of town. Short Hills Park is listed on both the National and New Jersey Registers of Historic Places and the Wyoming district is listed on the New Jersey Register.

Last week, the Multiple Listing Service had 73 houses for sale in the town. They ranged in price from \$229,700 for a two-bedroom colonial that needs work, on a narrow lot near the center of town, to \$6.75 million for a 20,000-square-foot mansion with a 2,300-square-foot guest house on three acres on Hartshorn Drive.

Although houses in Millburn often sell for more than \$1 million, Teresa K. Kennedy, a sales associate at Bergdorff Realtors in Short Hills, said they rarely fetch more than \$3 million.

BUT pegging the values of high-end Millburn homes can be tricky. "People will buy a house for millions of dollars and then start renovating and adding on, or they might even tear it down and rebuild," Ms. Kennedy said. "So how can you predict what that house will resell for?"

Mayor Elaine Becker said: "In 1998 Millburn residents took out permits for \$22 million in additions and renovations. That was the highest amount for any community in the state."

The mayor said that the town is in the throes of change as elderly residents sell their houses to younger families. Although Millburn has a large number of doctors, lawyers and other professionals, the mayor said that the majority of newcomers are connected with the financial industries in Manhattan. Among the attractions is NJ Transit's Midtown Direct train service: commuters leaving Millburn end up at Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan, avoiding the more laborious route that terminates in Hoboken, where Manhattan-bound riders have to transfer to PATH trains.

Scott and Ruth Miller may be typical buyers. Five years ago, they moved from an apartment in Brooklyn Heights to a six-bedroom colonial built in 1950 on a three-quarter-acre lot on Old Short Hills Road.

"Our two boys, then 3 and 4 years old, were approaching school age," Ms. Miller said, "and we wanted a suburban community with an excellent school system and an easy commute to Manhattan," where Mr. Miller is an investment banker.

The Millers have since enlarged their bedrooms and added a new family room. "Before we decided to build onto our home, we looked into moving but felt that we would still have to renovate the next house to get exactly what we wanted," Ms. Miller explained. "We were already involved in this community through the P.T.A. and volunteer organizations and didn't want to uproot the family."

Ms. Kennedy of Bergdorff Realtors characterizes the housing market so far this year as hectic, and many houses have received three or more bids, she said. During the first six months of the year, 124 houses were sold, compared with 137 sales in all of 1999. She said the market has cooled slightly in the last month, but she was not sure of the reason.

There are 20 apartment complexes in the town, some of which have been converted to condominiums. Two-bedroom condos typically sell for \$105,000 to \$160,000. The largest condominium complex is Lakeside Village, with 98 garden apartments on Main Street. Only one apartment was on the market last week, listed at \$126,900.

Short Hills Terrace, with 123 apartments, is the largest rental complex in town. One-bedrooms start at \$1,300 and two-bedrooms at \$1,700, but vacancies are rare here and in Millburn in general.

As older residents sell their houses in Millburn, public-school enrollment is escalating sharply. It now stands at 3,714, compared with 2,283 in 1990. Dr. James F. Donovan, the superintendent of schools, said that by 2007, enrollment is projected at 4,500.

In the last year, the district completed additions to two of its four elementary schools and took back a fifth school that it had leased to a day-care center when school enrollment dropped during the 1980's. Next year, the district plans to break ground on additions to Millburn Middle School and Millburn High School.

The public school system offers a full-day kindergarten program, and students start learning phonics and basic computer skills. Dr. Donovan said that technology is stressed throughout the system. By the end of middle school, all students should be able to operate word-processing, graphics, spreadsheet and presentation programs, he said, and they should be able to conduct research on the Internet.

THE 860-student Millburn High School offers 22 advanced-placement courses in history, mathematics, the sciences, computers, foreign languages, literature, English and music. Of the 188 students in the class of 2000, 97 percent are going on to college. Students who took the College Board tests had a combined verbal and mathematics average of 1198, nearly 200 points above the state average.

"We and the parents have very high expectations of our students," Dr. Donovan said, "so they work very hard at everything they do."

There are three private schools in town: the Far Brook School, with nursery through the eighth grade; the Pingry Lower School, with kindergarten through the sixth grade; and St. Rose of Lima, a Roman Catholic school with kindergarten through the eighth grade.

The 36-acre Gero Park on White Oak Ridge Road is the most widely used. It has a nine-hole par-three golf course, the town's sole public pool, four tennis courts and two baseball diamonds. Annual adult memberships at the golf course cost \$55, with greens fees \$2.50 on weekdays and \$3.75 on weekends. Family pool memberships are \$200 annually.

Just east of Gero Park is the private 18-hole Canoe Brook Golf Course. The largest recreational area is the 2,000-acre South Mountain Reservation recreation area, owned by Essex County. About half of the reservation is in Millburn, and the other half in Maplewood, South Orange and West Orange.

Taylor Park, 13 acres on Millburn Avenue, was laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted, It has a central fountain and a number of ponds and footbridges, all ringed by a walking trail.

Despite the proximity of the Mall at Short Hills, which is anchored by Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom, Macy's and Saks Fifth Avenue, Millburn's central business district continues to thrive along Millburn Avenue and Main Street. The district has some 130 places that serve food, including half a dozen ice cream parlors, over a dozen coffee shops and about 30 full-service restaurants. The Millburn Delicatessen is renowned for its sloppy Joe sandwiches. The district also has two supermarkets and businesses that reflect the community's wealth: 20 banks, boutiques, beauty salons and antiques stores.

Three blocks north of Millburn Avenue, on Brookside Drive, near the site of Mr. Campbell's original Mill-on-the-Burn, is the Paper Mill Playhouse, one of the country's best-known regional theaters. "Pippin" is the current offering, and tickets range from \$18 to \$38.

Correction: July 23, 2000, Sunday An article last Sunday about living in Millburn Township, N.J., misstated the range of ticket prices at the Paper Mill Playhouse. It is \$36 to \$60, not \$18 to \$38.