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REAL ESTATE

If You're Thinking of Living In / Berkeley Heights, N.J.; Quiet Streets Near River and Mountain

By JERRY CHESLOW OCT. 11, 1998

Correction Appended

ALTHOUGH bisected by several major arteries, including Springfield, Plainfield and Mountain Avenues, the Township of Berkeley Heights in Union County retains its rustic ambiance.

Many of its tree-lined residential streets follow the contours of the Second Watchung Mountain and the Passaic River, which forms its northern border. Its largest commercial enterprise, Lucent Technologies, is set far back from the road. Even the downtown, along Springfield Avenue, has an unplanned suburban feel -- a hodgepodge of strip malls, small stores and supermarkets that are set far back, behind vast parking lots.

The township owes its rural character to its late development. Until 1941, when the American Telephone and Telegraph Company built its Bell Laboratories research facility in the township, it was a sleepy farming and resort community. According to a history compiled by the League of Women Voters in 1963, the population mushroomed to 9,500 in 1962 from 2,194 in 1940.

"Bell Labs drew scientists and other professionals to the area," Mayor Daniel A. Palladino said. "Among the inventions that emerged from the facility were the transistor and low-loss optical communications fibers, used in fiber-optic cable."

According to the Berkeley Heights Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Robert T. Stowell, Lucent Technologies, the successor to Bell Labs, has been "very supportive of the school system." In 1993, it cooperated with Dr. Stowell on what he believes was the first demonstration of the use of the Internet for educational purposes.

Today, Lucent supplies the township's Governor Livingston High School, free of charge, with a high-volume, high-speed T-1 line for Internet use. Besides the high school, the 2,275-student Berkeley Heights school system consists of an early childhood center at Hamilton Terrace for kindergarten and first grade, three elementary schools for second through fifth grades and the Columbia Middle School for grades six through eight.

"We chose to equip one school for kindergarten and first grade because we felt that it was healthier for the children not to be competing with their older siblings during their first years in school," Superintendent Stowell said. "We equipped the playgrounds to better serve these children, placed bulletin boards at their height and designed libraries for more exploration."

Computers are introduced in kindergarten, with at least one computer in each classroom. The middle school has two computer laboratories and the high school five.

Although it is within the township borders and served Berkeley Heights students, Governor Livingston High School was only incorporated into the Berkeley Heights system in the last school year. This followed a long battle for state legislation to allow the breakup of Union County Regional High School District No. 1, which included four high schools and six municipalities: Berkeley Heights, Garwood, Kenilworth, Clark, Springfield and Mountainside.

Among Berkeley Heights's complaints with the old setup was that, since it had a high per-household income, it was paying the highest per-pupil cost among the participating municipalities. "It was costing us \$20,000 per student, when Garwood was paying \$8,000," Dr. Stowell said. "We were subsidizing the system."

The high school offers 13 advanced placement courses in English, history, mathematics, the sciences and foreign languages. It has 18 sports teams and its Highlanders marching band is renowned for its bagpipes and kilts. Last year, the band defeated 28 other high school bands to win the Atlantic Coast Championship.

OF last year's 184-student senior class, 91 percent went on to higher education. That class had a combined average verbal and math score of 1,131 on the Scholastic Assessment Test, compared with a state average score of 1,005.

The school system was a major attraction for Christian and Tracy Procaccini, a young couple that bought a 40-year-old three-bedroom split level on Timber Drive five years ago, moving in from nearby Longhill Township, where they were living in a small two-bedroom house. Both grew up in the area and Mr. Procaccini works in the Lucent Technologies headquarters building, a 10-minute commute to Warren.

"We looked in Summit, New Providence, Berkeley Heights and Longhill Township, all of which have excellent school systems," Mrs. Procaccini said. "My first choice would have been Summit because it has a very nice downtown. But the housing here was more affordable and the street is quiet with a lot of trees and tons of kids. We now have a 2-year-old son and I'm excited about the early childhood center concept."

Delores Scott Croneberger, a sales associate with Burgdorff Realtors in neighboring New Providence, says the Procaccinis reflect a trend in which young families are buying older homes from empty-nesters.

Many of the early postwar homes are expanded capes or four-bedroom colonials on half-acre lots. Single-family houses listed for sale in the multiple listing service range from \$179,900 for a small ranch in the Free Acres section on the southwestern side of town to \$599,000 for a four-bedroom colonial on Emerson Lane nearby.

Among the more prestigious newer areas of town is Cinnamon Ridge in the central section, where custom colonials sell in the \$500,000 range, Ms. Croneberger said. Closer to the center of town, expanded capes and ranches along tree-lined Coolidge or Harding Drives sell for \$320,000 to \$350,000.

Among the less expensive homes are small ranches and capes built on slabs in the 1950's along Delmore Avenue, where one house is listed at \$189,000.

Since 1992, there has been explosive growth in town house condominiums, mainly to satisfy the township's obligations under the State Supreme Court's Mount Laurel rulings, which require communities to provide housing to people of all incomes.

Like many other New Jersey municipalities, Berkeley Heights allowed builders to construct four market-rate, high-density units in return for building one low- or moderately priced unit. The growing number of housing units has worsened an already-congested rush-hour along the town's main arteries and even some internal roads as drivers seek shortcuts.

Among the newer condominium communities, the 40-unit Berkeley Village, off Plainfield Avenue, is the most moderately priced. Two-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath units there start at \$214,900. At the Highlands, a 62-unit complex off Springfield Avenue, two- and three-bedroom town houses sell for \$225,000 to \$269,000, Ms. Croneberger said. The most luxurious complex is the 44-unit Berkeley Meadows off Meadowview Lane, which has two- , three- and four-bedroom units at

from the low \$200,000's to \$400,000. One four-bedroom unit recently sold for \$395,000.

The earliest construction in Berkeley Heights began in an area that is now part of the 2,000-acre Watchung Reservation, a Union County park that includes 305 acres of the township.

The first white settler was Peter Willcox, who received a 424-acre land grant in 1720 from the Elizabethtown Associates, a group that bought much of northern New Jersey from the Leni Lenape Indians in the late 17th century. Mr. Willcox built a grist and lumber mill across Green Brook.

In 1845, Mr. Willcox's heirs sold the mill to David Felt, a paper manufacturer from New York, who built a small village called Feltville around the mill. It included homes for workers and their families, dormitories, orchards, a post office and a general store with a church above it. Mr. Felt was nicknamed King David because of the dictatorial way in which he ran the village, obligating workers to attend church on Sundays and to observe a 9 P.M. curfew.

In 1860, Feltville was sold to sarsaparilla makers, after which it was used for a number of manufacturing operations, before going into bankruptcy in 1882. When residents moved away, it became known as Deserted Village, the remains of which consist of 130 acres on which there are seven houses, the store, the mill and a barn.

The site, on the National and State Registers of Historic Places, is under restoration by the Union County Parks Department, with grants of almost \$2 million from various state agencies. Deserted Village, in the Watchung Reservation, is open daily for unguided walking tours during daylight hours. On the weekend of Oct. 24-25, free guided tours of Deserted Village will be held as part of a countywide historic celebration called Four Centuries in a Weekend.

Another early community of note is the 67-acre Free Acres, established in 1910 by Bolton Hall, a New York entrepreneur and reformer. Mr. Hall believed in the idea of Henry George, the economist, of single taxation, under which residents pay tax to the community, which, in turn, pays a lump sum to the municipality. Among the early residents of Free Acres were the actor James Cagney and his wife, Billie.

TO this day, residents of Free Acres pay tax to their association, which maintains its streets and swimming pool, approves architectural changes to homes and pays a lump sum in taxes to the municipality. "You could say that it was an early condominium community," Mayor Palladino said.

Early life in Berkeley Heights is documented in the Little-Lord Farmstead, an 18-acre museum surrounding two houses, one of which was built in the 1750's and the other near the turn of the century, according to Helen Tyler, president of the society.

Among the exhibits are a Victorian master bedroom and a Victorian children's room, furnished with period antiques. The children's room also has reproductions of antique toys, which visitors can play with. "We thought that, since it is a children's room," Mrs. Tyler said, "it would be unfair to prevent modern children from touching the toys."

The museum, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, also includes an outbuilding that was used as a summer kitchen, a corner crib dating to the 19th century and a spring house, built around a spring and used for refrigeration. It is open on the third Sunday of each month from 2 to 4 P.M.

Berkeley Heights has two supermarkets in the business district on Springfield Avenue. The street is filled with restaurants, serving Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, Italian, Thai, Indian and American food. Among the best known are Auberge Swiss (German), Di Maio's (Italian) and the Trap Rock Microbrewery. The closest major mall is Short Hills, four miles to the north.

Correction: *October 18, 1998, Sunday A picture caption last Sunday about Berkeley Heights, N.J., misidentified the town house development. It is Berkeley Village, not Berkeley Meadows.*