

Medford Neighborhood Overviews

BROOKS ESTATE

The Brooks Estate neighborhood is located in the northwest corner of the city, having the Mystic Lakes and Arlington as its west boundary and Winchester on the north (a substantial section of the Brooks Estate was ceded to Winchester in 1850). On the east, it ends at the Middlesex Fells and its southern boundary follows an irregular line through West Medford, of which it is geographically a part. The topography is generally flat. A stream, known as Whitemore or Playstead Brook, originates in Brooks Pond in the center of the northern section of the neighborhood, on what remains of Brooks family residential estate, and flows south in the Playstead park where it joins an unnamed creek flowing southwest from the Fells and then is piped underground to the Mystic.

Grove Street, an old highway leading to Woburn, is a principal thoroughfare; it originates at High Street, which represents the neighborhood's southern boundary with West Medford and enters Winchester at the north city line. Playstead Road was put into use at the turn of the 20th century. With its southern terminus at High Street, the road's serpentine course bends around the east side of the Brooks family's residential estate and the Oak Grove Cemetery to where it merges with Woburn Street, another old road, and farther on, Winthrop Street just before it enters Winchester. First the Middlesex Canal (1803) was routed through the west side of the Brooks Estate. No above-ground features remain from this waterway; Sycamore Avenue was built over the ditch in the early 1900s. The canal was made obsolete by the Boston & Lowell Railroad, which bisected the neighborhood in 1830. This line is still in use by the MTA commuter railroad and for which West Medford is an important local station. The Mystic Valley Parkway was constructed along the east bank of the Mystic River as a part of a sanitation project the 1890s. At that time the Mystic Lakes were created as reservoirs and the shorelands placed in reserve.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The area was the western part of the plantation granted Gov. Matthew Craddock in 1629. His house and barn were located in Medford Square near the town green (now the site of city hall). Later in the 17th century, the easternmost portion of this holding was conveyed to Caleb Brooks and Timothy Wheeler. The Brooks family went on to develop the tract as an extensive farm, and by the 19th century, they had attained sufficient wealth to distinguish the property with elegant homes and an expansive pleasure ground. The section south of High Street (West Medford neighborhood) was cut off and sold in 1850 by Gorham Brooks to Roxbury merchant Thomas P. Smith. The rest remained in family hands until the early 1900s when a number of residential subdivisions were created shrinking the Brooks personal holding to the northern half of the estate. This land, along with Shepherd Brooks stone mansion, is now held in a public trust, conserving a valuable historic resource and open space.

Brooks Estate Neighborhood in 1855

The Brooks Estate neighborhood was largely defined by farms in 1855, most of them associated with the Brooks family which had owned the tract since the 17th century (Fig.1). By this time, the greater holding, which included land across the Winchester town line, had been subdivided into a series of smaller parcels fronting on Grove, Woburn or Winthrop streets. The map assigns them to either Gorham Brooks, Edward Brooks or just Brooks. Edward and Gorham Brooks were heirs of Peter Chardon Brooks (1767-1849) who made the family fortune and developed the estate into an elegant country seat. Gorham Brooks's house is depicted on the east side of Grove Street, close to the Boston & Lowell Railroad. This house is not extant and its property is now part of Thomas Brooks Park. Edward Brooks is identified with a house on the west side of Grove Street; there is a large house in that location in the midst of a later residential subdivision that may be this historic building.

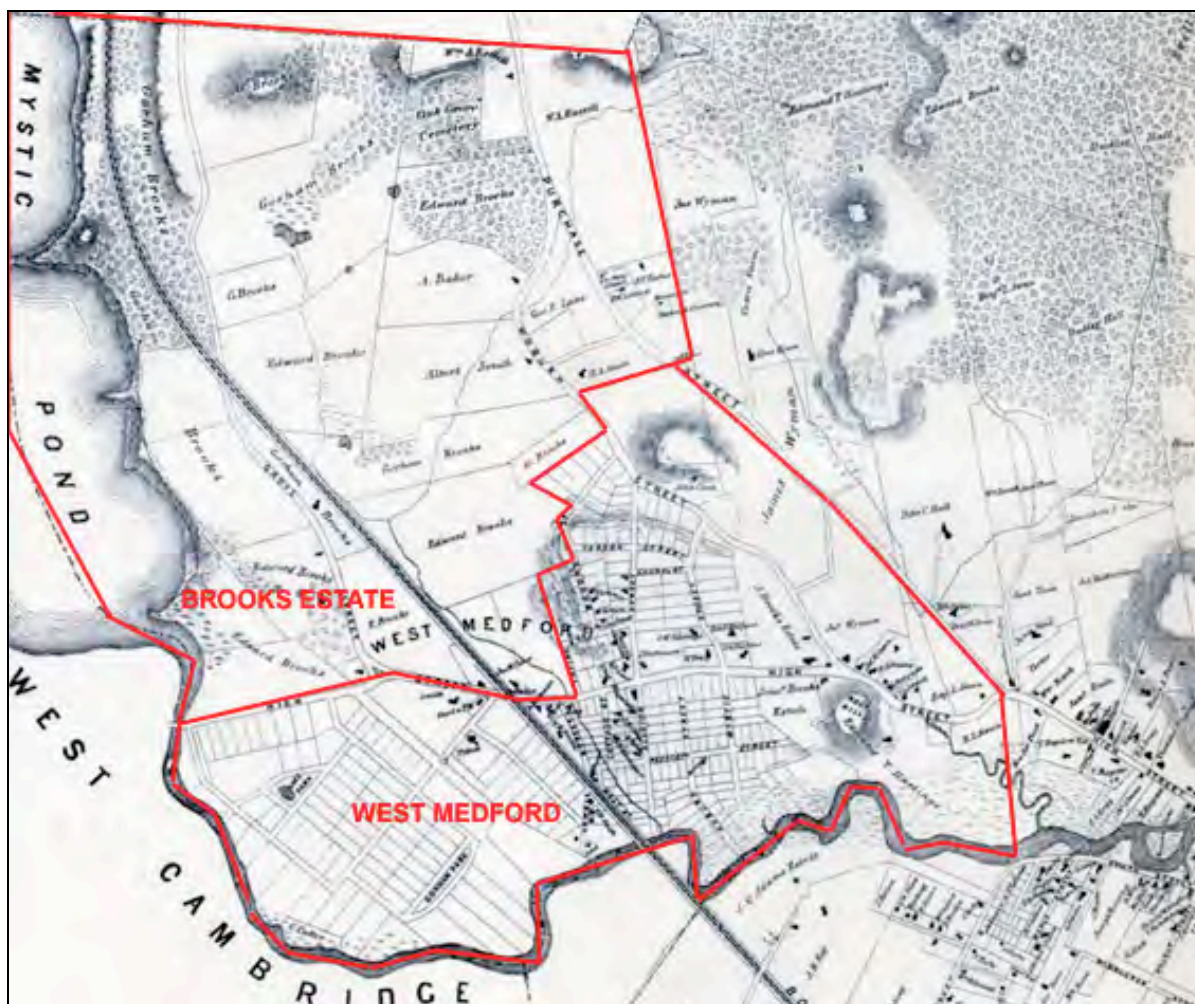


Fig.1: 1855 map of Mendon, detail showing boundaries of Brooks Estate and West Medford neighborhoods.

As currently defined, the Brooks estate neighborhood includes parcels east of the Brooks family holding along Woburn and Purchase (Winthrop) streets. Albert Smith owned a sizable farm on the

west side of Woburn Street, and his house still survives (Fig.2) Augustus Baker kept a hotel just north of the Smith place, and George F. Lane farmed across the street. The northeast corner of the neighborhood contained William J. Russell's large farm—his house still stands on the west side of Winthrop (Fig.3)—and the newly-created Oak Grove Cemetery, for which the Brooks family donated the land. South of Russell's farm on Winthrop is an enclave of dwellings associated with Benjamin F. Parker and Lorenzo Chase, both masons, and David Lathrop, a printer. Harvard University owned a small square parcel in the midst of this group for unknown purposes. The almshouse was located east of here (and in Medford Square neighborhood); it is now the site of the Medford high school; the surrounding land is now part of the Middlesex Fells.



Fig.2: Albert Smith farmhouse, 230 Woburn St.



Fig.3: William A. Russell farmhouse, 708 Winthrop St.

Brooks Estate Neighborhood in 1900

Maps register few changes in the Brooks Estate during the last half of the 19th century. Peter C. Brooks III built a stone mansion near the Mystic River in 1859. It was designed by Calvert Vaux, and it was this period of picturesque landscape development that has been captured in photographs. The house is gone and little of the landscape remains except for a section containing Peter's son Shepherd Brooks's mansion, designed by Peabody & Stearns in 1880. The 1898 map of the estate depicts these features, as well as residential subdivisions beginning to be planned near High Street and the West Medford center (Figs.4&5). Notable are the appearance of the Brooks Playstead, a public park initially containing a race track, Playstead Road wrapping around the east side of the park, and a plat of five streets east of that and west of Warren Street subdivided into house lots. The lots are vacant and have the name of Charles I. Travelli superimposed over them (Fig.5). The 1900 census lists him as an iron and chemicals merchant living with his wife, Emma, in the Newton household of his mother-in-law, Rebecca Robinson. She was the widow of Charles J. Robinson, a lawyer. A native of Pennsylvania, Travelli was living in Pittsburgh with his grandparents in 1880.



Fig.4: Map of Brooks Estate, 1898. The only subdivision platted at this time was the Travelli plot indicated by the street plan east of the Brooks Playstead park pictured on the lower right of this map and in more detail in Fig.5 below.



Fig.5: Map of West Medford, 1898. The Travelli plot is on the left side of the map adjacent to Brooks Playstead.

Brooks Estate Neighborhood in 1930

The character of the Brooks Estate changed dramatically during the early decades of the 20th century. The Travelli plat likely was the first to fill in, and each street has a regular pattern of two-family houses intended to integrate with the pre-existing urban plan of the West Medford center (Figs.6-8). The two-family units introduced a more progressive affordable house type to the neighborhood. Two-family houses were also constructed on new lots created between the railroad and Grove Street along Tyler and Johnson avenues (Fig 6) and near the river on Pitcher and Kilgore avenues, Hill St. and the Mystic Valley Parkway (Fig.9). Both these areas extended the type of middling house development from the older West Medford “Brooklands” subdivision north across High Street.

A residential subdivision of better single-family homes was built in between the two-family developments, that is, along Sagamore Avenue and Grove Street and streets in between from High Street up to Jackson Road (Fig.9). All this was realized before Shepherd Brooks died in 1922, possibly at his initiation. The houses are large and were designed in a range of period styles: Colonial, Shingle and Craftsman (Figs.10). Siting and setbacks were carefully controlled to create neat, uniform streetscapes. Front yards and mature trees contribute to a park-like setting.

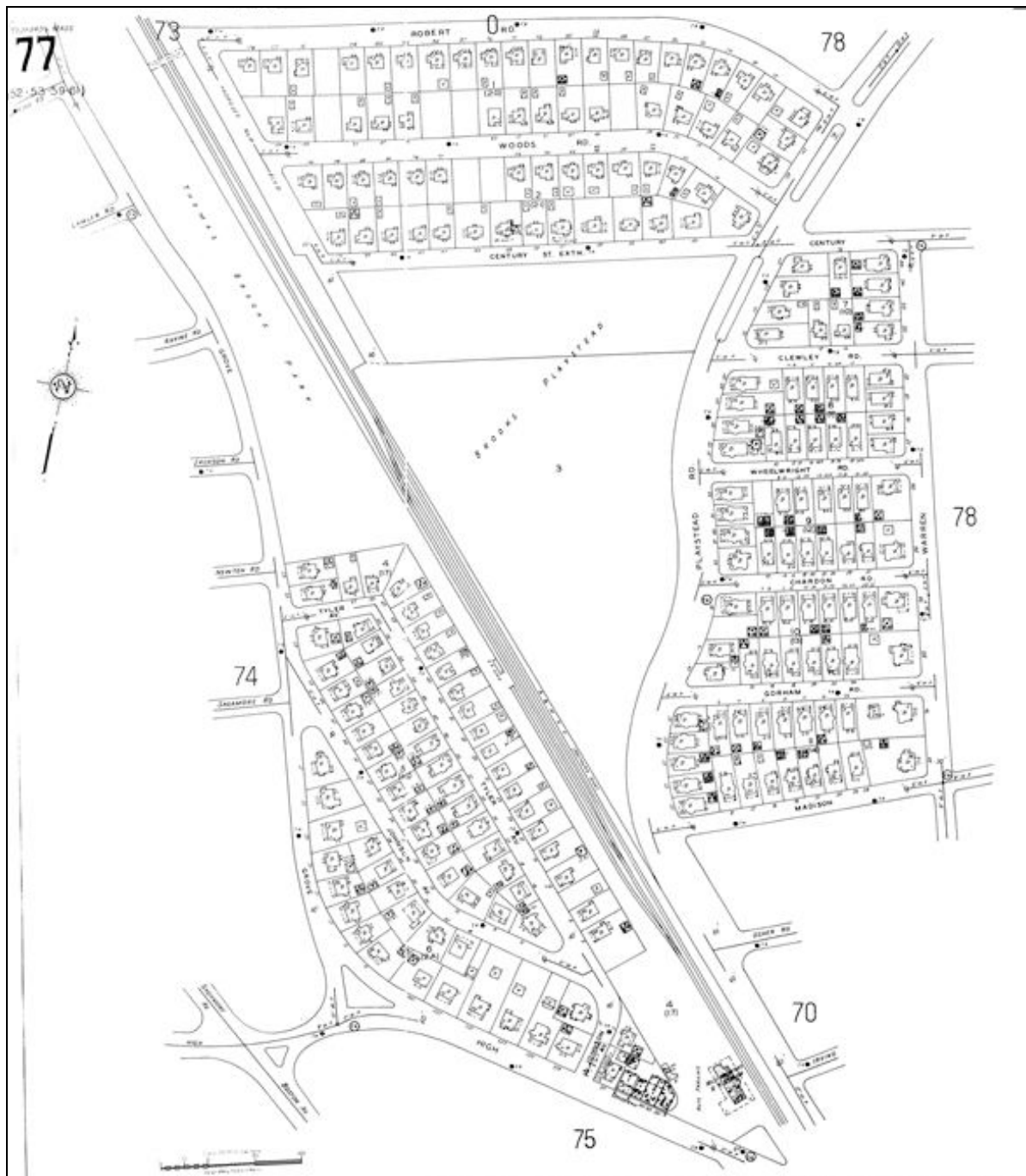


Fig.6: Sanborn Insurance Maps for Medford, Plate 77, 1936. The Travelli plot is located to the right of the Brooks Playstead with footprints of two-family houses. Tyler and Johnson aves. are depicted on the left side of the railroad tracks.



Fig.7: View looking east across the Brooks Playstead at houses fronting Playstead Rd.



Fig.8: Madison St. west of Warren St.

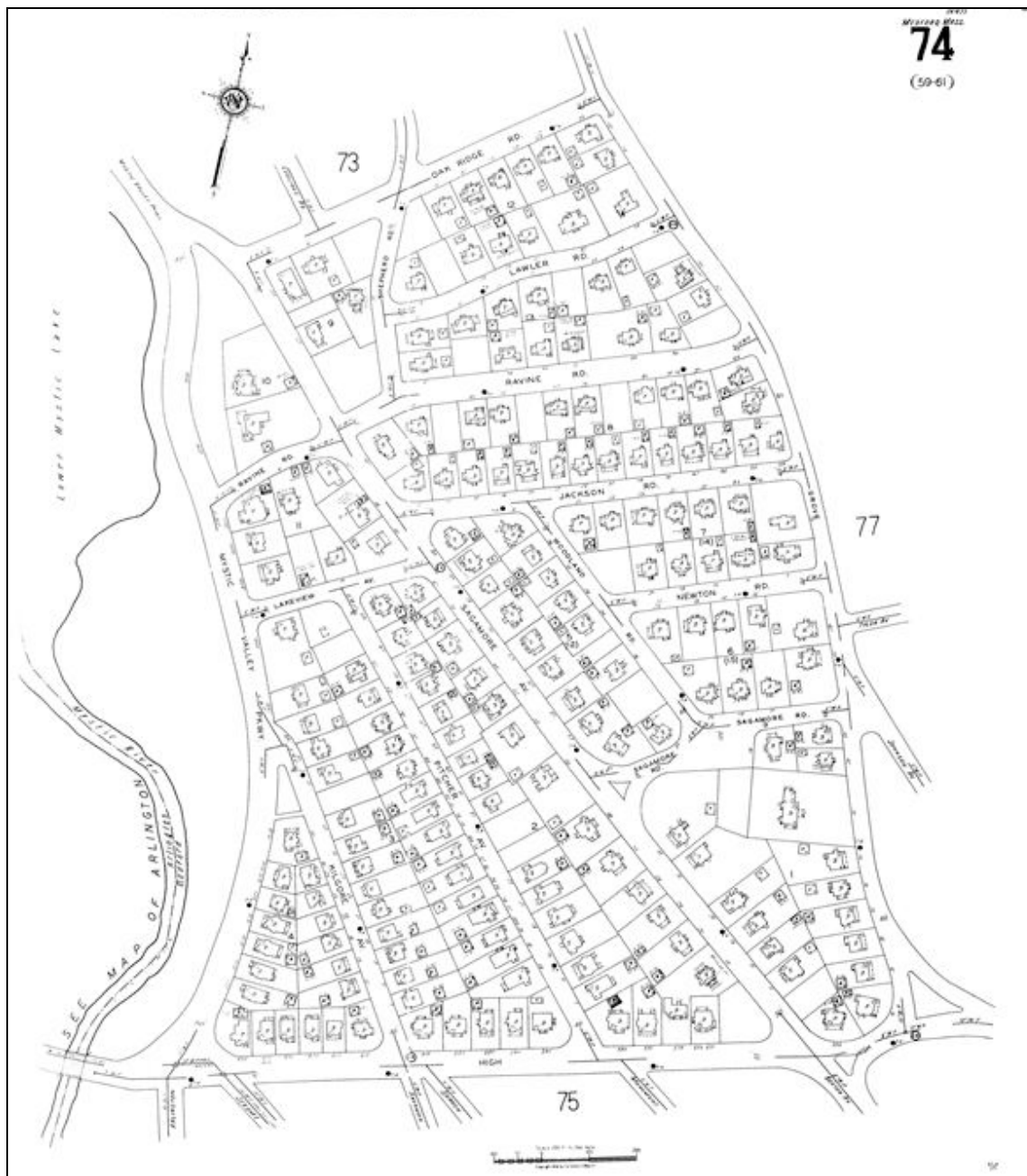


Fig.9: Sanborn Insurance Maps for Medford, Plate 74, 1936. Single family dwellings built early in the 20th century along Sagamore Ave. and along streets connecting with Grove Rd. up to Jackson Rd. appear to be part of a planned development. Two family houses occupy lots in the lower left corner along Pitcher Ave., High St. and the parkway.

A second planned development began north of Jackson Road, probably after Shepherd Brooks's death. Sandwiched between the railroad tracks and the Mystic River, the narrow parcel was platted with large lots along serpentine roads. Pine Ridge Road was laid out on the bluff above the Mystic Valley Parkway with lots overlooking the lakes where a string of large brick houses in Tudor Revival-style designs were built (Fig.11). The rest of the subdivision contained houses in an eclectic mix of Colonial, Dutch Colonial and Craftsman styles, including bungalows (Fig.12).



Fig.10: Houses at 58 & 60 Sycamore Rd.



Fig.11: House at 96 Pine Ridge Rd.



Fig.12: Saltonstall Rd., south side west of Grace Rd.

During this period, new subdivisions were being made on three new streets (Century, Woods and Roberts roads) platted north of the Brooks Playstead as well as in the triangle between Playstead Road and Woburn Street on Century and Clewey roads. In the latter case, subdivision plans dated in 1922 and 1923 resulted in a uniform development of two types of shingle-sided two-family homes in the Craftsman style (Fig.13). Houses of similar style but more varied in design filled out the northern end of Warren Street. Once Century Road crossed Playstead Road, the designs of houses changed to single-family types and to the Colonial style, suggesting that they were built in the following decade (Fig.14). The east side of Playstead Road between Century and Woburn contains early Cape Cod and Dutch Colonial houses built in this period, and a brick, two-story Colonial Revival school on the corner of Playstead and Roberts roads is a landmark of the emergence of this early 20th-century neighborhood.



Fig 13: Century Rd., north side east of Warren Street.



Fig.14: Century Rd., north side west of Playstead Rd.

Brooks Estate Neighborhood after 1930

As one of the last areas in Medford to open up for development in the 20th century (The Hillside Neighborhood is another), the northern edge of the Brooks Estate contains some of its most important Depression- and Post-WWII-era housing. In 1938 the Russell Farm at the north end of Winthrop Street was the location of a residential subdivision that overlapped into the town of Winchester. On the east side of Winthrop, on Winford Way and Priscilla Lane, Cape Cod houses were constructed. At the intersection of the two streets is a boulder with a plaque stating “Colonial Village 1938.” Along Robinson Road on the west side of Winthrop—where the old Russell farmhouse is still standing—the predominant house form is a two-story, three-bay Garrison-style house. A separate subdivision was made at the south end of the farm, opposite the cemetery, along Franklin Avenue, Hedland Way and Ronaele Road, yet it was not developed in the same systematic way and contains numerous houses built at later dates. Other small subdivisions have been slipped in along old and new streets intersecting Winthrop south as far as (and including) Brooks Street.

A characteristic house from this period is part of a small subdivision with buildings of identical design created on Priscilla Lane, a cul-de-sac behind Playstead Road opposite Roberts Road and the school (Fig.15). Roberts Road had been platted at the southern end of the Oak Grove Cemetery sometime in the 1920s, but the north side of the street did not contain houses on the 1936 Sanborn map (Fig.6). Shortly after the map was published, a string of Cape Cod houses were built there (Fig.16). This development continued past the west end of Roberts Road and up the east side of Russell Road opposite the railroad tracks. From there this new development follows the west side of Grove Street, which is lined mostly with larger Garrison-style houses (Fig.17). After crossing the railroad, Grove Street enters the extreme northwest corner of Medford where Peter C. Brooks III’s 1859 mansion was located. (A stone cottage from that property survives on Apache Trail.) It was probably after the war that the existing subdivision was developed on Grove Street, Norwich Circle and Josephine, Terrier and Alandale roads with Cape Cods, Garrisons and—rare in the Medford context—Ranches (Fig.18).



Fig.15: House at 12 Diane Rd.



Fig.16: Roberts Rd., north side east of Russell Rd.



Fig.17: Grove St., west side north of Russell Rd.



Fig.18: Norwich Cir., west side south of Terrier Rd.

There is little evidence of new construction occurring in the past 50 years. Ad hoc in-fill has occurred in various places, and is particularly noticeable in the eastern section along Winthrop Street, on streets between Winthrop and Playstead, and in the Russell Farm subdivision on the east side of Winthrop on Franklin Avenue and connecting streets. As in other places where the dominant exterior material is wood, many houses have been altered with the application of new synthetic sidings and original wood windows are being systematically replaced with new insulated units following the popular trends of energy conservation and home improvement. Otherwise, the present has little impact on the historic Brooks Estate neighborhood.



Fig.19: Aerial view of Brooks Estate showing neighborhood boundaries and stages of development.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SURVEY: Brooks Estate Neighborhood

- Survey Trevelli tract on an area form (approx. 100 properties)

The Travelli tract is a distinct development of two-family houses between Warren Street and Playstead Road

- Survey properties in early Brooks development area north of High Street, south of Jackson and west of railroad on one or more area forms (approx. 200 properties)

This tract is mixed and may be broken down into two or three subgroups as context allows. Large single-family houses on Sagamore and Grove streets constitute a distinctive set if they can be effectively separated geographically from more modest single- and two-family dwellings on peripheral streets.

- Survey properties in section developed between the wars on two area forms
 - Area north of Jackson and west of railroad (approx. 160 properties)
 - Area on Century, Woods & Roberts north of Playstead Park (approx/ 74 properties)
 - Area east of Playstead Rd., i.e., Century, Clewley, Gleason, Warren & Wildwood (approx 150 properties)

These areas each contain one or more planned subdivisions and a variety of distinctive affordable house designs.

- Survey Depression/Post-WWII-era subdivisions on south and west periphery of cemetery and Brooks Estate Land Trust on one or more area forms. Streets include Roberts, Russell, Grove, Josephine, Terrier, Alandale & Norwich (approx. 140 properties)

This area contains one of the most important post-WWII subdivisions in the city.

- Survey “Colonial Village” on Russell Farm on an area form. Streets include Robinson, Winford & Priscilla; on both sides of Winthrop Ave. (approx. 50 properties)

This is a distinctive 1938 subdivision of Cape Cod houses. Development overlaps into Winchester.

- Survey “Colonial Village” on Russell Farm on an area form. Streets include Robinson, Winford & Priscilla; on both sides of Winthrop Ave. (approx. 50 properties)

This is a distinctive 1938 subdivision of Cape Cod Houses. Development overlaps into Winchester.