

Origins of the Waccabuc Landowners Council

In 1900, Waccabuc . . . and all of Lewisboro . . . was very rural. There were large stretches of farms and pastures. Mead Street was a narrow segment of the "post road" that ran from New York City to Danbury. There's a Franklin marker (as in Ben) in front of the Country Club (just north of the flagpole) indicating that you are "52 miles from NYC."

The mail arrived each day from Katonah in a four-seated stagecoach with its team of horses. The original post office, built in 1879, was the size of the present lobby. When the mail came in, the postmaster would sort it, place it in the mailboxes, and then ring a siren that hung outside the post office. This signaled to the local residents that the mail was in and sorted.

The Waccabuc of 1900 was a close-knit community. About 50 families lived here. The post office was the daily meeting place for most of the Waccabuc community. There was little crime and no land development. Almost no one traveled more than 20 miles from home. There was no need to.

Between 1900 and 1960 the groundwork for future change was set by advances in transportation and by the decline in active farming.

First, transportation. Starting in the early 1900s, the introduction of the automobile and state financing of the construction and maintenance of state roads acted to bring Waccabuc closer to New York City . . . and New York City closer to Waccabuc.

Second, decline of farming. In the 1900s, most of the farms were dairy farms that shipped milk to New York City from the Golden's Bridge train station. However, stricter state sanitary laws that increased the cost of running the local dairy businesses and sharp competition from upstate dairy farms combined with higher land taxes to make it more economical to close down many dairy farms. As the large farms closed, they were sold to "gentlemen" farmers, held for investment, or sold to developers. And large tracts of open land can create a lot of mischief.

From 1960 to 1980 the changes accelerated.

First, the construction of Interstate 684 from White Plains to Interstate 84 in Brewster in 1964 and the electrification in 1970 of Metro North from North White Plains to Dover Plains brought Waccabuc and New York even closer together.

Second, in the late 1960s, a private organization, Suburban Action Institute (SAI), came into the picture. SAI was dedicated to ending what it considered to be exclusionary zoning and sought to provide low-income housing outside urban areas. It took an option on a large piece of property off Lake Waccabuc just south of Chapel Road.

SAI's proposal was for a self-contained community of 14,000 people with its own stores, schools and transportation. The group and its proposal collapsed because of internal financial problems, but not before several public and very tense Planning Board meetings.

Third, "In the early 1970s the U.S. Postal Department decided to close the Waccabuc post office because the building did not meet "the environmental standards for working conditions" for its employees. (The building was falling down and there wasn't even a lavatory!)

In August 1973 formal notice of the post office's closing was given to the residents. At that time, the only residents' association in existence was the Field Association. Its main concern was the protection of property from illegal hunters.

The Field Association sent appeals to Senators, Congressmen, and Washington Postal Department officials. Meetings among the Association and Federal, Regional and Local Representatives of the Postal Department were held. In October 1973, it was agreed that the Waccabuc Post Office would remain open if certain improvements to the facility were immediately started. It was at this time that Waccabuc Community Services, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation, was formed to take over the operation of

the Post Office facility and finance the improvements.

Waccabuc Community Services, Inc. purchased the Post Office from Mead Properties, Inc. Renovation plans were approved and work was started. During construction, the Post Office operated from the Waccabuc Country Club until its completion in the spring of 1974. Since that time, the operation of the facility has been successful, with rental income from the Post Department covering about half the cost of owning the building. In 1998-1999 the Post Office spent \$100,000 to expand the Post Office to its current size.

By 1980 about 200 families were living in Waccabuc with many working in NYC or White Plains. To the old-timers, it seemed that Waccabuc's bucolic tranquility of the past was being threatened. Developers wanted to gobble up the open land and the US Postal Service wanted to shut our post office. The barbarians were at the gates!

In 1980, a string of home burglaries in Waccabuc (burglars were looking to capitalize on the increased price of silver) was the last straw. This became the catalyst for 105 families to gather together and form the predecessor to the Waccabuc Landowners Council in March, 1981. Annual dues were \$25.

Originally, the organization was called the Waccabuc Community Association. The first newsletter . . . vol 1, no 1 . . . in July, 1981 stated that the purpose was to confront the community issues of " burglaries, vandals, and trespassing; increased land development; insensitive use of land; and a lack of social cohesiveness within the community."

Five primary committees were established to address these issues. Home Security, Field and Lakeshore, Land Development, Property Maintenance, and Community and Social Activities.

Home Security - concerned with stopping the incidents of theft and vandalism

Field and Lakeshore – concerned with the unauthorized use of private land (swimming, hunting, dumping, trail bikes, and snowmobiles).

Land Development – concerned with preservation of Waccabuc's charm and character that drew us all here in the first place.

Property Maintenance – concerned with the appearance of Waccabuc. From "clean-up" days to the Waccabuc signs to planting flowers and trees

Community and Social Activities - concerned with developing a social cohesiveness

By March 1982, only a year later, these five committees accomplished a lot.

- 110 families agreed to pay \$150 each to hire a private guard company to patrol the Waccabuc community on a regular basis. (The rate of burglaries dropped dramatically.)

- trespassing was reduced on private property and a hunting patrol was hired to prevent hunting near residential areas.

- there were clean-up days for roadsides and lakeshore, a new sign was added at the bottom of Mead Street, and window boxes and Christmas wreaths were added at the Post office.

- representatives attended Town meetings to monitor discussions and represent the Waccabuc community interests.

- there was a community fall picnic and a Christmas Eve service at Mead Memorial Chapel

Twenty-one years later, there are about 320 families living here and "the barbarians are still at the gates." The US Postal Service is still trying to close its smaller offices, land developers are still proposing housing developments like the one for the Houlihan property, and burglars are still looking for homes without a neighborhood patrol. And the Waccabuc Landowners Council is still working hard to protect and enhance the community we all love.

(This article was freely adapted from past newsletters and "A History of the Town of Lewisboro". If you are interested in Lewisboro from the Big Bang to 1980, get a copy. It is fascinating reading.)