

# White Plains Historical Society

FOUNDED IN 1983 • SUCCESSOR TO THE BATTLE OF WHITE PLAINS MONUMENT COMMITTEE

Jacob Purdy House • 60 Park Avenue • White Plains, NY 10603 • [www.whiteplainshistory.org](http://www.whiteplainshistory.org) • Summer/Fall 2013

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## William Saxton: Loyalist – Namesake of a County Park

On April 11, 1775, eight days before the battles of Lexington and Concord, the freeholders of Westchester County gathered at the courthouse in White Plains to choose delegates to represent the colony of New York in the Continental Congress. These men were sharply divided on the question of independence; so much so that a large group of them adjourned across the street to Capt. Hatfield's tavern to draft a declaration of loyalty to the Crown, just yards from the place where the Declaration of Independence would be read for the first time in the newborn State of New York on July 11, 1776.

Among the signers of the loyalist document was William Saxton. Born in White Plains in 1730, Saxton and his family leased 313 wooded acres from John Delancey (grandson of Caleb Heathcote, and father-in-law of author James Fenimore Cooper) on the border of White Plains and Scarsdale along the west branch of the Mamaroneck River (known also as the "Branch Brook"). Saxton owned a saw mill there, and the land was known as "Saxton's Forest" or Saxton's Woods." A copy of the 1774 "Heathcote Map" on display at the Westchester County Archives, clearly shows the boundaries of "Lot No. 3" leased by Saxton and his father before that.

Between 1776 and 1781, large armies would periodically march through Westchester (most notably in October-November 1776 during the Battle of White Plains), but in between these movements, the local population was engaged in a civil war; neighbor against neighbor, in which "Cowboys" and "Skinners" terrorized the local population and took vengeance, provisions, and prisoners at will. In 1777, William Saxton was arrested as a Loyalist and held prisoner for 6 months at his own expense. He later fled to the safety of the British lines in Morrisania with other "Loyalist Refugees." His son John joined the Loyalist regiment of "Westchester Volunteers." John assisted Rogers Rangers in a skirmish in Mamaroneck days before the Battle of White Plains, and later escaped imprisonment in 1778. At the end of the Revolution, the Saxton family fled to Canada where William petitioned the Crown for restitution for the loss of his home and land. He died in Digby County, Nova Scotia in 1791. His son John lived until 1847, and is one of the few photographed veterans of the Revolution. John Delancey, also a Loyalist, fled to Great Britain, but reclaimed his lands in 1789, which were later sold by his heirs.

In 1925, Jay Downer, Chief Engineer of the Westchester County Park Commission, urged the County's acquisition of the Edward G. Faile estate as parkland and a right-of-way to complete the Hutchinson River Parkway. The property, with the exact meets and bounds as Saxton's Forest, was purchased by the County for \$200,000 and other parcels were added to it to create the 700 acre Saxon Woods Park. Though its name conjures images of knights in chain mail, it is really a quiet tribute to a one-time local resident, and the complex Colonial and Revolutionary history of our community.

Sources: Family History of Elsie Oleaf Dorn by David Wilma, <http://home.comcast.net/~davidwilma/famhistory.htm>. Historic Treasures of Westchester County <http://westchesterarchives.com>. History of Westchester County, New York by J. Thomas Scharff, L.E. Preston & Co., New York, 1886. It Happened in Old White Plains by Renoda Hoffman, White Plains 1989. Minutes of the Westchester County Parks Commission. January 22, 1925 pp. 19-20.

# ***White Plains Home of Percy Grainger, Great 20th Century Composer and Arranger, Needs Your Help***

## **The Percy Grainger House National Historic Site**

By Kimberly Ruggiero

The Percy Grainger House, located at 7 Cromwell Place in White Plains was the home of Percy Aldridge Grainger, the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Australian-born pianist and composer. Grainger moved to the United States at the outbreak of World War I in 1914. While in the States, he composed such pieces as *In a Nutshell* and his piano solo *Country Gardens*, which become a smash hit. With his new found wealth, Grainger and his mother Rose settled in the suburb of White Plains, New York. In 1921 Percy and his mother moved into the Cromwell house, which had been built in 1893 by the Cromwell family. After his mother Rose's death, Grainger spent little time at the house until he married Ella Strom-Brandelius. From then until his death in 1961 it was Percy and Ella's home, and where Percy did much of his composing and arranging. Ella continued to live there until her death in 1979. The brown shingled house is now maintained by the International Percy Grainger Society and contains such artifacts as the paintings of Ella, Percy's instruments, manuscripts and gramophones, and his famed exercise bar. Visitors are welcome by appointment.



**Above: The Percy Grainger House at 7 Cromwell Place was built in 1893 by David Cromwell, founder of the Home Savings Bank and one of the founders of White Plains Hospital.**

### ***Necessary Roof Repairs to Commence at the Percy Grainger House***

The International Percy Grainger Society, a not-for-profit organization, maintains the Grainger House, which is considered a landmark by the National Music Council, and is listed on the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places. The building, which is open to the public by appointment and contains many of Grainger's possessions (including his pianos) is undergoing restoration and requires a new roof. The White Plains Historical Society has recently donated \$1,000 toward this effort, and would like to encourage those who are able, to also lend their financial support to the preservation of this historic home. To learn more about the house, please go to:

<http://www.percygrainger.org/grahouse.htm>

To lend your support to the restoration effort, and/or to arrange a tour, please contact:

Stewart Manville, Curator & Archivist  
 Percy Grainger House  
 7 Cromwell Place  
 White Plains, NY 10601  
 Tel: (914) 582-1237 or (914) 948-7436

# THE JONATHAN PURDY CEMETERY: A STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE THE LEGACY OF ONE COLONIAL FAMILY IN MODERN DAY WHITE PLAINS

By Alan Hartman

The White Plains Historical Society has long struggled with how to maintain and preserve the Jonathan Purdy Cemetery, despite its very strong efforts over the years. The cemetery is located on Mamaroneck Avenue near White Plains' southern border with Scarsdale, NY. This cemetery holds approximately 66 descendants of the founding family of White Plains, including the ancestors of our current Secretary of State, John Kerry.

I am also a descendant of Jonathan Purdy, who died in 1772 and is my 10<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather. Growing up, I was often told about our proud heritage as descendants of the founding families of Westchester County, who became increasingly influential in New York City in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. My distant late relative Elijah Purdy even served as the Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall, where he was known as "The War Horse of Tammany" until his death in 1866 (he was laid out in City Hall and Boss Tweed helped arrange his funeral). My great-great grandfather, Alfred D. Knapp I, married Hannah Purdy and began the very profitable Knapp Shipping and Lumber Company in what is today the Mott Haven section of the Bronx (Knapp Street in the Bronx is named after them), and they became the owners of very valuable parcels of land in Manhattan, including 111 S. Broadway, which is next to Trinity Church and just around the corner from the New York Stock Exchange. The lumber business had a fleet of Yankee Clippers that shipped lumber from around the world into a booming city that urgently needed it. Although their economic ties moved the family to what was then the southernmost reaches of Westchester County, today the Bronx, they maintained an elegant homestead in White Plains and always returned to White Plains for burial.

The Jonathan Purdy Cemetery is on land that was always set apart for use by all Purdy descendants, regardless of who owned the surrounding property. The cemetery was first founded on a large farm owned and operated by Jonathan Purdy. Jonathan Purdy died in 1772 and his son, Isaac Purdy, the brother of my 9<sup>th</sup> great grandfather Elijah Purdy and a patriot during the American Revolution, inherited this land. Upon Isaac's death in 1816, the land was sold and his executors were obligated by Isaac's Will to purchase a piece of land for his son Gilbert, on which he had a life tenancy. The property that was bought for Gilbert by the executors of his father's estate surrounded the Jonathan Purdy Cemetery.

Gilbert Purdy only had one child, Margaret, who married Joseph Haviland in 1827. Upon Gilbert's death in 1828, Margaret inherited his land but not the

cemetery, which he explicitly "reserved" in his will for all descendants of the Purdy family to use and access. The reason for this is obvious. By the 1820s many generations of the Purdy family were buried in the cemetery and The Haviland Family had their own cemetery in Harrison, NY, scarcely a mile away from the Jonathan Purdy Cemetery. Margaret Purdy married into the Haviland family and so she and her husband, together with their descendants, are buried in the Haviland Family Cemetery, which was used for burials well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

In 1834, Margaret and Joseph Haviland sold the Purdy family farm that Margaret inherited from her father. In this sale and over the next 68 years, every deed/sale/transfer of the land (there were six) "reserved" the Jonathan Purdy Cemetery from the sale and included a clause that allowed the Purdy Family to access and use the Cemetery. In 1902, this "reserve" clause inexplicably disappeared from the sale of the land parcel. This does not mean that the cemetery was then sold, however. We see this in the records of The City of White Plains, which foreclosed on that same property in 1946. The City of White Plains insured the foreclosed property, but not the "cemetery". Title #6026216 states that as a result of the city's land inspection upon foreclosure "No title will be insured to any land included in Parcel One herein, which is within the confines of the old cemetery upon said parcel, the approximate location of said old cemetery being shown upon 'survey of Property Belonging to Estate of Paul G. Thebaud' dated September 25, 1925." On July 25, 1949, Leonard and Annette Wolfram bought this foreclosed parcel of land from The City of White Plains. The purchase deed says that the Wolframs are "subject to any and all rights, if any, in and to a cemetery located on said premises, including but not limited to any and all rights of ingress and egress, if any; and subject to and reserving out of and from the said premises for the construction and maintenance of a slope (not exceeding five feet in width) in connection with the reconstruction of Mamaroneck Ave."

Today the cemetery is for the first time in its history at risk of being destroyed. The land is again for sale, now for over \$2 million. Thus there is a risk that if the land is sold it may be developed and the cemetery lost forever. The White Plains Historical Society is doing all that it can to avoid such an unthinkable and deplorable thing from happening. Let us hope that the founding families of White Plains, and thereby its early history, will continue to be preserved and remembered in the City's terrific recent growth and prosperity.



Above: Headstone of Elijah Purdy, Jr. (1790-1827), a relation of the author, at the Jonathan Purdy Family Cemetery. At this burial ground, the White Plains Historical Society has so far helped finance and arrange the restoration of 3 headstones, and assisted with the replacement of two headstones, including one for Revolutionary War Veteran Hercules Wessels. This has been a team effort, with additional financial support from the City of White Plains, and many volunteers like Michael Bennett, the Boy Scouts of Troop 73 and Troop X, and volunteers who periodically clear brush.

Photo by Robert Hoch

***Save the Date:*** Sunday, October 27, 2013—  
The **White Plains Historical Society** presents  
the **237th Anniversary Commemoration of  
the Battle of White Plains**—Jacob Purdy  
House National Historic Site (Washington's  
Headquarters) - 60 Park Avenue, White Plains.  
More details to follow!

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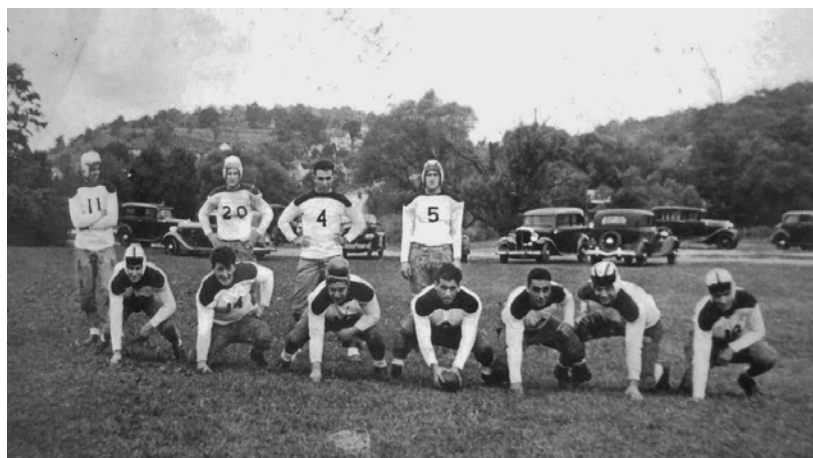
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Left: "Local luminaries" of the White Plains Giants football team cir. 1937. Games were played at Recreation Park (now Carl Delfino Park) and practices were held at George Washington School (which, by the look of the landscape, is the setting of this picture). The Depression was boom times for football in White Plains. White Plains High School allowed the enrollment of post graduates due to the lack of available jobs, making them an unbeatable power-house in New York State, and having to travel as far as Utica for competition.

Photo Courtesy Richard J. Holzer, III

# BEARS, TIGERS, AND THE WHITE PLAINS GIANTS

*"Do these cool mornings and chill nights make you anxious for the arrival of the football season?" - Ed Salter, Sports Columnist Daily Reporter, Sept. 7, 1938*

By John Vorperian

Clearly in the late 1930s this City had a strong triple threaded love affair with the Gridiron Game. The White Plains Tigers High School Football team's contests were the key affair for Autumn Saturdays. On Sundays in the fall, White Plains denizens supported not just one but two semi-professional franchises, the White Plains Bears and the White Plains Giants.

The White Plains Bears were affiliated with the American Association. This minor league organization had teams in New York, New Jersey and New England. Some NFL club owners like New York Giants owner Tim Mara, Chicago Bears owner George Halas, and the Cleveland Rams held financial interests within the circuit. World War II stymied the conference's growth and led to its eventual demise. (This column will have more information about the White Plains Bears in a future WPHS newsletter.)

Recently, the White Plains Historical Society received a wonderful donation from the family of Dick Holzer. The Holzer family contributed a frame of several sepia snapshots of the White Plains Giants posed and in action from the 1937 season. In that year, except for a 7-7 tie against Port Chester, our local eleven went unbeaten in the regular season. On November 27, 1937 the White Plains Giants journeyed to Harbor Island Stadium and played in a benefit exhibition game billed as the unofficial semi-pro championship against the Mamaroneck Dodgers.

Who were the White Plains Giants? Let Daily Reporter Sports Scribe Salter explain: "The Giants will be no member of any league nor will they present 'big name' college stars in the lineups weekly, but they will have about 20 local luminaries who will have made reputations on the gridiron during the past as participants with the famed Tiger elevens. John Hayde, Frank Jacob, and Dick Holzer who guide the destinies of the club have promised a good team with opponents of comparable strength providing the opposition weekly."

Their foes were the Danbury Eagles, Don Bosco, Eastchester Eagles, Mount Kisco Maroons, Mount Vernon Indians, Peekskill Redmen, Port Chester Thunderbolts, Stamford Hillandales, Tuckahoe Blue Jackets, Yonkers Pioneer Bears, and, in the words of Mr. Salter, "whatever clubs are reigning in New Rochelle and Pelham."

The independent Giants played their home games at Recreation Park (now Carl Delfino Park). Practices were held at George Washington field. The admission price for games was "kept to a low scale making the games available to every pocketbook." Players were iron men playing both offensive and defensive positions. The team relied upon the gate and the selling of game programs for revenue. Attendance for a home opener was 400. At times games were postponed due to rain-outs or mud-outs. Apparently melting snow and its results wreaked havoc with Recreation Park field for the players and the parking area for motoring spectators as well.

If you have any information to share about White Plains semi-pro football please contact the White Plains Historical Society at [www.whiteplainshistory.org](http://www.whiteplainshistory.org)

John Vorperian is WPHS 1<sup>st</sup> Vice-President and Host of BEYOND THE GAME, White Plains Cable Television Channel 76/45, and [www.wpcommunitymedia.org](http://www.wpcommunitymedia.org). Special Thanks to Dan Burke, the Stamford Historical Society and Bob Swick, Publisher & Editor GRIDIRON GREATS for their encouragement of this article.

## WHITE PLAINS GIANTS 1937 & 1938 Team Roster

Name	Position	Weight
Joe Baldicini	Guard	200
Ted Beck	Guard	170
Rudolph Briante	Tackle	195
Courtney Burton	Right Half Back	170
E. Cannetta	Guard	170
W. Chrico	End	160
Ralph Curcione	Quarterback	150
Red Ernst	Back	175
John Gazzini	Right Tackle	200
Harry Gordon	Half Back	160
John Hayde	Player-Coach	
Dick Holzer	Left End	198
Frank Jacob	Full Back	185
Bill King	Right End	187
Joe Marra	Center	185
Pep Marra	Center	175
Burr McIntosh	Quarterback	160
Joe Paterno	Right Tackle	225
Vince Palmeri	Back	180
Rusty Petruko	Back	180
Alvin Sheldon	Tackle	210
Fred Sheldon	End	190
Fred Willets	Half Back	180

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