

The Reynal Family and Its Living Legacy

By Barbara Carlson

White Plains is a city of neighborhoods, beautiful historic neighborhoods, 29 in all. One of these neighborhoods is Reynal Park and its adjacent sister, Rocky Dell. Current streets named Reynal Road (in Reynal Park) and Reynal Crossing (in Rocky Dell) indicate the prominence of the Reynals. The Reynals were a wealthy extended New York City family who lived on Madison Avenue and Park Avenue but owned considerable acreage at the border areas of White Plains and Scarsdale from the 1850s until approximately 1925. The present Fenway Golf Club's clubhouse is part of an original Reynal family home named "The Orchards." But who were the Reynals and how did these two neighborhoods come into being?

Early information about the Reynal family include the construction of the present St. John's Church on Hamilton Avenue which was the gift of Mrs. Jules Reynal in 1892, donated in memory of her father, Nathaniel F. Higgins, who had been a wealthy carpet manufacturer and of her son Jules Reynal, Jr. The Thebaud mansion, "a showplace on Hillair Circle", was a three-story structure built in 1902, containing more than 30 rooms and was owned by Paul Thebaud and his wife, Mathilde, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Jules Reynal. Also built in 1902 was a "stone residence" named The Orchards, a home for Eugene Reynal, which contained "more than fifty rooms, twenty baths, a swimming pool and gymnasium." This home adjoined Rocky Dell Farm, the country property belonging to his mother. The Scarsdale newspaper, *The Scarsdale Inquirer*, contains information from the years 1902 to 1925 about the doings of the families, from "brilliant social gatherings" and expertise with polo ponies to participation in Scarsdale village politics. One member of the family, Eugene, was on a committee for San Francisco earthquake relief in 1906. Parts of the Reynal properties were also adjacent and sold to the New York, Westchester and Boston Railroad.

However, changes began to take place. In 1915, The Orchards was leased to the Misses Tewksbury School for Girls of New Milford, Connecticut and included an option to buy. Then the home was purchased by the Fenimore Golf and Country Club, which then sold it to the Trio Development Corporation, a group of White Plains businessmen in 1925. Rocky Dell Farm, the other Reynal home on an adjoining property had burned to the ground in 1924. Also In 1925, a contract was signed for the Ridgeway Avenue station of the New York, Westchester and Boston Railroad at what is now Reynal Park. An advertisement for a public auction of 410 "business and residential lots" states that this was a "lifetime opportunity for investors and speculators in real estate to make overnight profits". This is exactly what happened and the auction reportedly was "one of the most successful real estate auctions ever held in White Plains."

Thus the development of Reynal Park and Rocky Dell as housing areas began. A map from the White Plains City Commission dated September 21, 1925 shows the platting of streets named in "Reynal Park - Subdivision of Property"; these streets included Reynal Road, Hewitt Avenue, Amy Place, Meda Place and Gene Place. Other Reynal Park Streets named Susan Court and Kenneth Road were developed in the 1950s. A subdivision map from the Village of Scarsdale dated August 4, 1925 shows streets in Rocky Dell such as Reynal Crossing, Coralyn Road, Wilmont Avenue and Hazelton Drive.

The development of the subdivisions Reynal Park and Rocky Dell (these neighborhoods did not form an association until 1987) signaled the end of the presence of the Reynal family. Very little information is available about them after this time, but we know that Jeanne Reynal (1903-1983) was born in White Plains, the daughter of Eugene Reynal. She studied art in Paris with several well-known artists, returning to the United States in the late 1930s and pursuing an art career in the field of mosaics. She lived in Greenwich Village, married the well-known abstract expressionist painter Thomas Sills, and enjoyed a successful career. As recently as December, 2015, one of her works was shown in an exhibit of contemporary painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, which owns some of her mosaic compositions.

Eugene S. Reynal founded the New York publishing company Reynal and Hitchcock in 1933. Before it was absorbed by Harcourt, Brace in 1948, the company had had associations with authors such as Pearl Buck, Roald Dahl, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Miller, Antoine de Saint-Exupery and even Adolf Hitler, when *Mein Kampf* was published in America in 1939! Also, Mr. Reynal garnered some negative publicity for turning down J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* on the grounds that it wouldn't sell!

And what of the Reynal family legacy? What have they given to succeeding generations? They've left White Plains great neighborhoods for families to grow and prosper and some would say that is riches beyond compare. Surely the Reynals would agree that's a great way to be remembered.

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