



How Green Were My Acres Builders, Designers, and Buyers in an Atomic Age Suburb, 1946-1956

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Go fast enough on Niagara Falls Boulevard, heading out of the City of Buffalo to the towns of Tonawanda and Amherst, and one is likely to miss the small 1950's office building on the west side of the road, just south of the intersection of Sheridan Drive. The single-story building is composed of two severe brick boxes sliding by one another, connected by a glass wall. The glass wall faces south, and is shaded by a thin, flat square of roof supported at its extremity by two slender steel pipes. It is set back from the street behind a flat lawn of bright

green grass with hardy hedges and trimmed evergreens planted along the foundation, attempting to soften the juncture of building and ground. An asphalt parking lot bakes in the July sun. The building is the modest home of Pearce & Pearce, the Buffalo area's largest residential development company of the post-War era. Pearce and Pearce built the 4,000 or so houses that surround the place.

Led by the driven Howard Pearce, it built the first split level house in the Buffalo area, if not the nation, in 1934¹. It built hundreds of low-cost split-level Capes in the depths of the Depression. When WWII came, rather than close shop because of prohibitions on the construction of non-essential housing, it built hundreds of government-standard housing units, mostly duplexes. During and after the war it was buying hundreds of acres of suburban land against the day when construction prohibitions would be lifted, materials shortages would be over, and millions of veterans establishing households would be looking for housing of their own.

Working closely with two architects over three decades, it developed Buffalo's iconic suburban houses, boxy 1940's and 1960's split-levels and one-story 1950's modernist ranches. The 2,500 ranch-style houses they built in the Green Acres development, if lack of modification and good maintenance are proof, remain popular with residents 60 years after they were built. Green Acres remains the largest housing development ever built in the Buffalo area, and brought Howard Pearce and his company national renown.

Pearce & Pearce wasn't the only company building houses in the suburbs, of course. Raymond Dewey and his R.C. Dewey Company built higher-end brick housing in Tonawanda near Delaware Avenue in the 1920's. In the mid-twenties it planned a big development 2 1/2 miles east at Niagara Falls Blvd., The Depression hit, and Dewey had to switch gears. Rather than rambling brick revivalist houses for lawyers, he would build a street of Cape Cod cottages, Dutch Colonial cottages, and Norman cottages of concrete block. Yet it is the ranch house, economical, informal, earnest, efficient, putting faith in technology, and a little hedonistic, that best reflects and flatters America of the 1950's.

It is a complicated legacy. The charming naivté projected by carports, corner windows, floating flower boxes, and all-electric kitchens comes from the realization that the ranch house, as a piece

¹ Buffalo Evening News

of architecture and artifact of history, is inseparable from its environmental consequences, and some social consequences as well.

The Builders

Pearce & Pearce had its beginnings in 1916 as a Buffalo, NY real estate brokerage² operated

by L.L. Pearce. L.L. succeeded in establishing the company to the extent that, two nephews by different brothers from Owosso, MI came to Buffalo to join the firm. Howard, born in 1895, came after being discharged from the army after serving in WW I, while Earl, born in 1897, came to Buffalo in 1924. Prospects for young men in Owosso had cooled considerably since the 1890's, when they were born. (Owosso's growth rate in the 1920's was one-tenth what it was 30 years, earlier, while Buffalo and Erie County were adding 130,000 people in the 1920's, the equivalent of more than one Owosso per year.³

In 1933, in the trough of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt was sworn into office as president of the United States, and the Pearces saw a strategy for survival: they would act as developers for entire tracts of middle-class houses.⁴ The housing industry was in tatters. Very little housing was being built, in part because it was so expensive to purchase a house. The creation of the FHA made it possible for banks to lower the cost of lending, and have the confidence to lend at all. In 1934, only 40% of Americans owned the house in which they lived. Buying a house was not easy, as only 50% of its cost could be mortgaged, and the balance had to be paid off in 3 to 4 years.⁵ The housing industry was looking for a jolt, and Roosevelt delivered it in the form of the National



Pearce & Pearce offices, Backus, Crane & Love, architects

² Buffalo City Directory

³ U.S. Census

⁴ Buffalo Business, Oct. 1953, p. 17

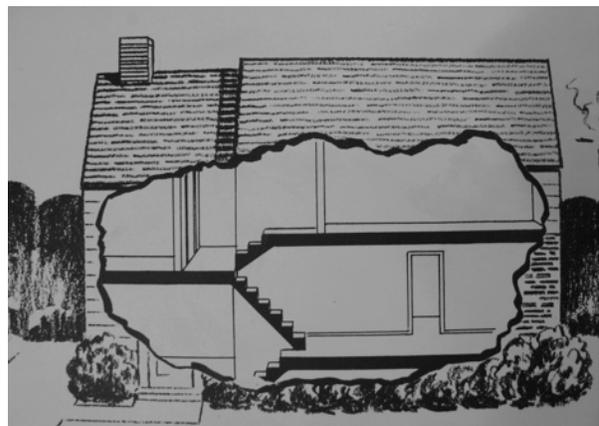
⁵ http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/housing/fhahistory. Retrieved 10/26/11

Housing Act of 1934, which established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and its guarantee of mortgages for the middle- and lower middle class. No sooner was the ink dry on the legislation, than Pearce & Pearce took advantage, teaming up with C&M Construction of Williamsville, NY to build hundreds of novel three-level cottages in the Harris Hill section of Clarence, NY over the next five years. In 1939, Pearce & Pearce, elected to construct its houses as well, and ended the relationship with C&M.⁶



Modified Pearce & Pearce Cape Cod cottage, built by C&M Construction. The house is based on a Walter G. Lanphear axial three level design. House on Connection Road, Harris Hill, in 1942. Project underway before wartime restrictions on homebuilders. Lanphear created three-level design to give illusion of two floors of living space above full basement. The house had a half basement and one and one-half floors of living space. Low ceilings just over seven feet high also kept costs down.

Pearce & Pearce had enlisted the expertise of architect Walter G. Lanphear to design its houses, and built 2,500 of them in Amherst and Tonawanda. Born in Buffalo, he moved to New York with his parents and went on to study architecture at Pratt Institute and Columbia University. He applied a post-war Walter Lanphear design for cross-axial three level house, built in Snyder and Lincoln Park developments by Pearce & Pearce.



⁶ Buffalo Business,

prenticed with the renowned firm of McKim, Meade & White, and returned to Buffalo in 1910, working for John Coxhead, designer of the Delaware Avenue Baptist Church. Lanphear's earliest known house designs are a series of Arts & Crafts bungalows built on Homer Avenue in Buffalo in the 1920's. The scale and materials of the bungalow were pleasing, but soon after the arrival of the style on the American scene around 1905 (with Gustav Stickley of Syracuse and Elbert Hubbard of Buffalo being major promoters of the style), it became evident that although the scale of the bungalows was pleasing, many buyers were looking for more useful second floor space. To maintain the look of a bungalow from the street, architects soon turned the ridge of the bungalow parallel to the street, allowing them to hide a full-height bedroom section in the rear of the house, while the front got an over-scaled dormer. In this way, the homeowner could have all the charm of a bungalow, but still enjoy the space of a two-story house. These would prepare him for the signal idea of his life and launch Pearce & Pearce as a mass builder.

During the Depression, it became necessary to design as much house for as cheaply as possible. The Cape Cod cottage had emerged in the 1930's and become the archetypical "American dream" house. It was small and snug and frugal, making a virtue of necessity. The 1930s Cape was smaller and its 17th century predecessor. But that still was too large for some people to afford. Lanphear developed a novel way to create the impression of a two-story house that was actually one and a half floors with a half basement. He would design the house like his Homer Avenue bungalows. He split his Cape axially, raising 2 bedrooms just four or five steps up from the living room and kitchen. Another four or five steps on another short stair would bring one to an attic space that could be finished as a 3rd bedroom. Four steps down from the living room and kitchen was a half basement. So the bedroom half-floor was above the basement, while the kitchen and living room were above a crawlspace. This gave the impression of two full floors of residential space on top of a full basement. In reality, just a half basement and one and a half floors of living space. Cheaper for the builder to build, cheaper for the homeowner to buy.

World War II led to an interruption in house building once again. Developers who wished to continue building could only do so if they built housing for war workers. Pierce and Pierce built 161 duplexes in Kenmore and Tonawanda. They bear all the hallmarks of being designed by Lanphear.⁷

⁷ Real Estate and Building Journal, May 1947



MR. VETERAN !!

This Is What You Have Been Waiting For!

Brand new single homes designed by Walter and Floyd Lanphear. 3 finished bedrooms, automatic gas heat, modern science kitchen, linoleum bath and shower, hardwood floors throughout, commodious lots, assuring ample light, air, and privacy. Select your own interior decoration. Bus service right at the door. We will back our reputation, that no better houses can be purchased at the price of \$9400-\$9600!!

**HOW CAN YOU AFFORD TO RENT,
WHEN YOU CAN BUY THIS HOUSE
FOR \$1 DOWN?**

\$62.00 a month pays all the rest—and remember, \$31 is applied against your principal.

NO MORE MOVING FROM PLACE TO PLACE—NO MORE CROWDING IN

See 704 Niagara Falls Blvd.
Between Sheridan Dr. and Kenmore Ave. Today!

PEARCE & PEARCE
3400 Main St. PA. 6600

Hard-selling ads hammered home 13 selling points of the Pearce & Pearce home to the target market.

to Niagara Falls. Lanphear designed them all, although he did not live to see all of them built. He died in October 1947, while construction was going full tilt.

Fifteen years of parsimonious designing created habits hard to break, and Pearce & Pearce and Lanphear hewed close to the minimal requirements of the Veteran's Administration mortgage program. It was the path of least resistance to a guaranteed return on investment. The houses along Niagara Falls Boulevard were an awkward split-level combination of the boxy government-

\$1 Down, \$64 a Month

With wartime restrictions, very little housing could be built in the country that wasn't related to the war effort. Pearce & Pearce got some of this, building duplex houses in the Village of Kenmore for rent to war workers. The duplexes, built to meet government standards and available materials and nothing more, were boxy and shorn of all detail. Managing this rental housing would come in handy immediately after the war, and after the post-war building boom ended.

With the lifting of restrictions on private residential construction after the war and the return of sufficient building supplies, Pearce & Pearce embarked on a project of several hundred houses in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Tonawanda and along Niagara Falls Boulevard, the main route from Buffalo

standards war housing and spare historicizing details. The price and scarcity of other housing brought out the crowds: “we had 80 of these under construction on Niagara Falls Blvd., and there seems to be no limit as to how many can be produced or sold,” Howard Pearce said.⁸



Lanphear did what he could to summon notions of domesticity, primarily by use of a projecting second story gabled bay. Since the main roof of the split-level designs began at the story-and-a-half level, the bay roof formed a cross axis. Squinting very hard, the observer could experience a flicker of shared American domestic culture: H.H. Richardson’s carefully composed shingled pavilions. Small pendants



An exact copy of H.H. Richardson’s influential Stoughton House, was built prominently on Buffalo’s Soldier’s Circle, where it stood for 50 years next to a house by Frank Lloyd Wright. Walter Lanphear, Pearce & Pearce architect, would have been familiar with it both from his studies and from his everyday travels around Buffalo. His projecting bay attempts to evoke the domesticity expressed in Richardson’s finely scaled pavilion.

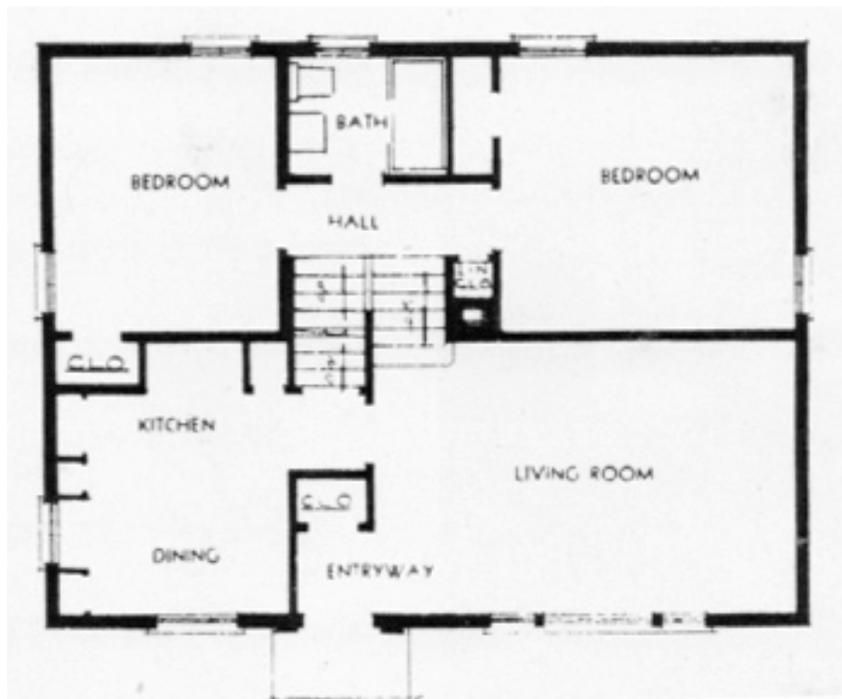
(often removed in subsequent remodelings) stood in for Richardson’s massive supporting brackets, the bay was really a dormer, not an end pavilion with its own terminating roofline, and, after Lanphear’s death, the bay could be seen floating over the facade without visible means of support.

⁸ Real Estate and Building Journal, May 1947

Lincoln Park was the first time Pearce & Pearce received national attention, being featured in Fortune magazine in January of 1947 and in Real Estate and Building Journal of May 1947.⁹ “Buffalo home builder sells homes \$1 down, \$64 a month,” the headline crowed. The article makes the claim that the three-level home was “a style introduced and promoted by the Pearce company in Buffalo.”

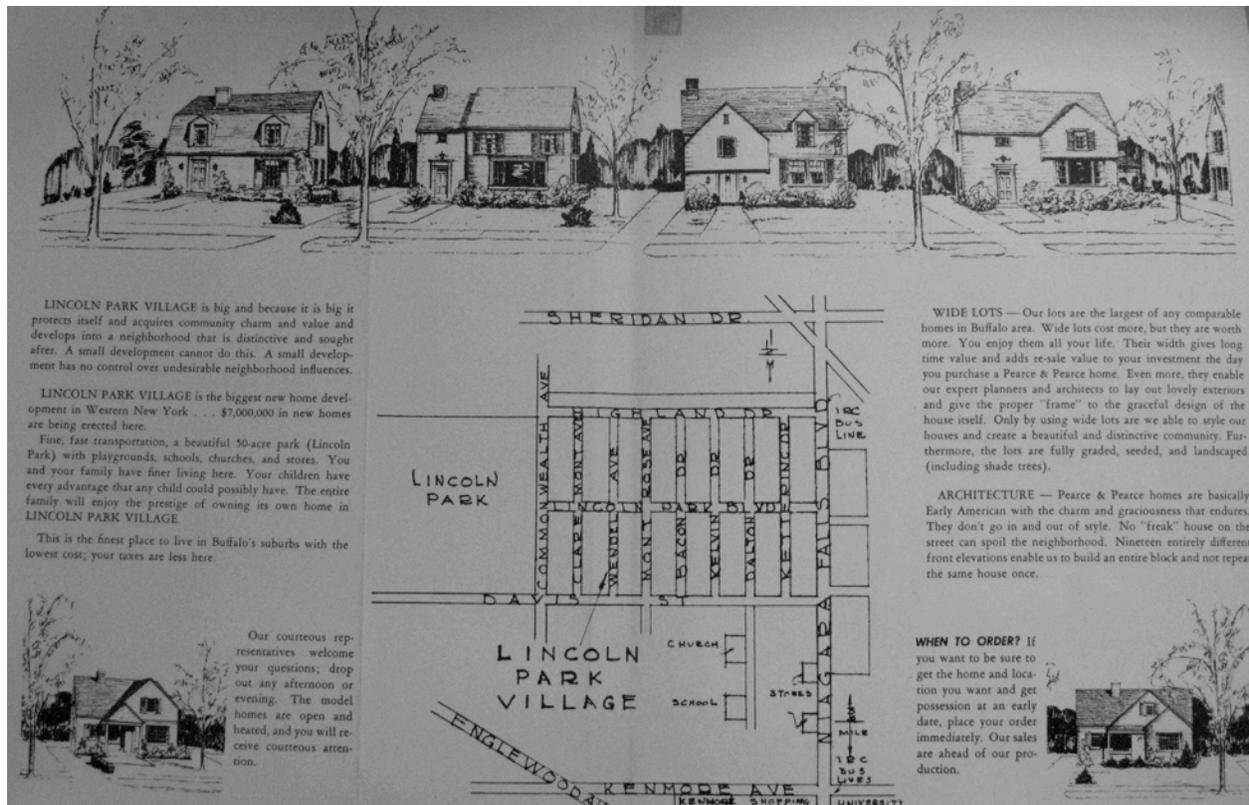
“The \$64 a month is made up of \$10 per month taxes, \$2 per month fire insurance, and the balance of \$52 being principal and interest at 4%, 25 years of. The average amount applied to the principal is \$31,” the magazine revealed.

Walter Lanphear’s son, Floyd, was noted as being employed directly by Pearce & Pearce. In addition to design work, Floyd also was liaison



Walter Lanphear’s designs for Pearce & Pearce in Lincoln Park Village had identical floor plans and awkward front elevations. The houses were split along the axes, with the bathroom at one end of the cross axes, making it impossible to cheaply expand the dwelling and requiring the climbing of stairs between living and entertaining areas and the bathroom. Yet there were advantages: the social areas of the house were placed along the front, and the houses along Niagara Falls Blvd. have commonly had front porches added, allowing residents to survey the action on the busy road and see, and be seen by, neighbors cruising by.

⁹ Scrapbook, Pearce & Pearce



A Lincoln Park brochure printed in 1948 is probably among the first efforts of William Pearce as company sales director. It illustrates the no-nonsense style of his writing, as well as the full range of the late Walter Lanphear's split-level designs. Lincoln Park comprised over 500 single-family houses and 300 rental duplexes.

with suppliers, and handled public relations and advertising.

It was in 1947, as construction on Lincoln Park Village and the houses on Niagara Falls Boulevard was underway, that Howard's son, William, joined the firm. A veteran (he later said he changed his name from Howard T. Pearce to William ("Bill") Pearce to avoid confusion with his father upon enlisting), he finished his Harvard MBA after the war and went to work for Robert McNamara's Ford Motor Company in the Lincoln Division. McNamara apparently wanted to stockpile Ivy League MBA's against the time he could put them gainfully to work in the fantastically disorganized company¹⁰, but Bill was bored. He came back to Buffalo at his father's urging and was named sales manager.

¹⁰ The Fog of War, Errol Morris. Interview with Robert McNamara

Versions of the Lincoln Park designs with two full stories were built in the Snyder area of Amherst, where one street was labeled Lanphear Lane in a Pearce & Pearce brochure. The company may have felt that neighborhood could support more expensive houses.

While houses like these, and large-scale developments like Lincoln Park, got the attention of the national press, not all of the notice was positive. Architectural and social critics inveighed against the boxy regimentation of the developments and the despoilment of the landscape, by twin phenomena of the tiny houses on large plots and the automobile strip which evolved to service them.

While William Levitt was engaged in building his development of 17,000 Cape Cod houses on Long Island, Pearce & Pearce was exploring one-story houses. It built several dozen 800-square foot houses on streets north of Lincoln Park on individual lots and strips of lots it managed to obtain. The houses are of indifferent design, and none, as far as can be determined, has survived in its original form.

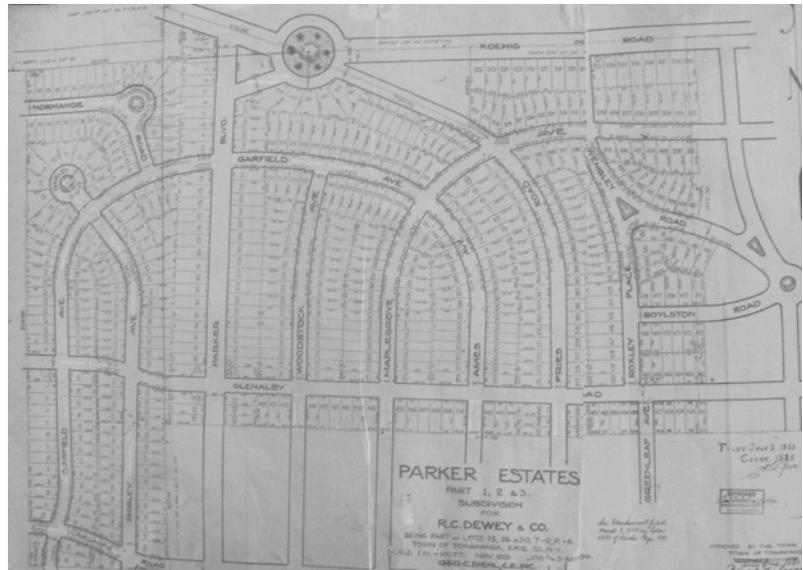
Around this time, Pearce & Pearce was assembling, largely through a county auction, a three-hundred acre tract of land a mile north of Lincoln Park. Walter Lanphear was dead, and, judging by the evidence of single-story houses that Pearce & Pearce built just after his death, Howard Pearce must have felt Walter's son Floyd wasn't up to the task of designing the houses he was envisioning for what came to be called Green Acres. It was to be the company's biggest project, the largest single-family housing development ever built in Erie County, and likely to remain so.

Home in the Ranch

Day in, day out, from 1953 through 1956, Pearce & Pearce built better than one ranch house each day. in Green Acres. Howard Pearce, in sole control of the company since his cousin Earl sold him his share of the company and left, found a sweet spot with the four basic models designed by David Crane of the firm Backus, Crane & Love. Employees and suppliers were in awe of the scope of construction and sales. "You could build anything and it could sell," recalled lumber supplier Ernie Montgomery almost 60 years later.¹¹

¹¹Personal interview, May 2011

R.C. Dewey's Parker Estates was platted in 1926 and approved by the Town of Tonawanda in 1930 as the Depression hit. Dewey ended up building 90 concrete block cottages, creating variety through manipulation of the roof shape and masonry, while creating a strong street definition through uniform massing and setbacks along a straight street. This collective presence is absent in the Green Acres streets lined with ranch houses, even with their smaller setbacks.



Green Acres began in the eye of another creative builder, Raymond Dewey. Dewey, who presided over his real estate and building empire from a large house on Delaware Avenue in Kenmore, assembled a tract sufficient for several hundred houses centered on Parker Avenue, in former farm land two miles east of Delaware Avenue and two miles north of the city border. He called his subdivision Parker Estates. With broad, curving streets and generous lots, it bore a resemblance to an upper class neighborhood, Central Park, four and a half miles south along Parker Avenue in Buffalo, then just



filling out.

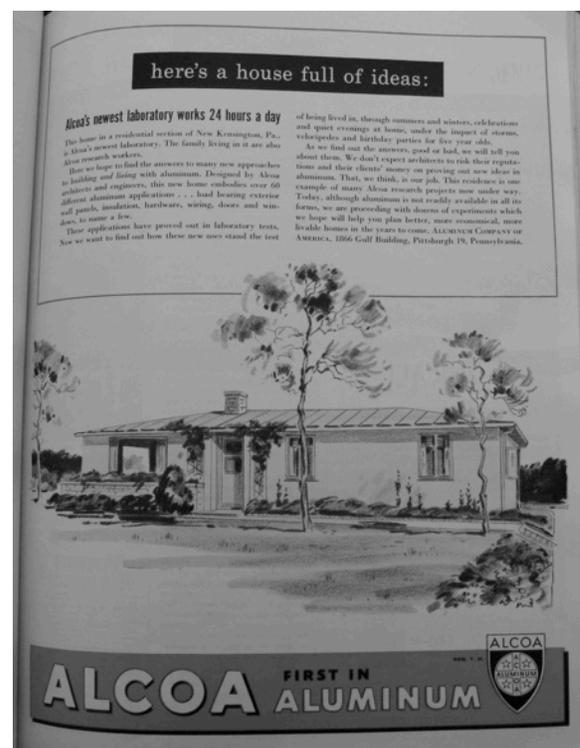
The Depression arrived before Dewey had a chance to begin building his favored brick houses at Parker Estates. He adjusted, and from 1939 to 1942 built 90 small concrete block houses, mostly based on the Cape Cod cottage then popular. His masonry obsession did not stop there. He also built a couple of one-story concrete block houses with square plans and pyramidal roofs. It is not a great

leap to imagine these elongated into a ranch house. (That is indeed what happened. In 1955, on a lot on Koenig, Dewey built a concrete ranch.) And one concrete block ranch house, in 1939, 10 years before Pearce and Pearce began experimenting with one-story plans, and 15 years before Pearce and Pearce built Green Acres and land that Dewey lost during the Depression.

These were halcyon days for Pearce & Pearce and the housing industry in the Buffalo area and across the nation. Years of pent-up demand, increasing income, household formation, VA and FHA mortgages, and low interest rates and down payments converged to create a housing boom. Montgomery's company, Pearce and Pearce's largest lumber supplier, would pre-cut as much lumber as it could in its plant on the Buffalo waterfront, and load it on a truck for delivery to building



R.C Dewey single-story cottage, 1939. It isn't a great leap to the ranch houses of the post war era, as promoted in national architectural magazines by building suppliers (below, Architectural Forum, March 1949)





Future Green Acres site, 1951, top. Koenig Road, built from 1939 to 1942, enveloped by Pearce & Pearce after the war (bottom)



crews in Green Acres. “We would ship a house every other day,” Montgomery said.¹²

As Pearce & Pearce’s prominence in the community increased, so did Howard Pearce’s. He was elected president of the Niagara Frontier Builders Association in 1946, and a director of the National Association of Home Builders the same year. With the very foundation of his company being mass market housing, it was natural that Pearce would make the acquaintance of many architects interested in housing. One of the architects most involved in housing issues and housing design was David Brooks Crane of the firm Backus, Crane and Love. Born in 1909, Crain attended Princeton and received an MFA in Architecture in 1933. While not a propitious time to be entering the job market in architecture, Crane apprenticed immediately with the dean of Buffalo architects, E. B. Green. He worked as a draftsman in the Green office at the time it was

¹² Interview, May 27, 2011

handling government office buildings and public housing projects.¹³ He was a member of the Buffalo City Planning Association and the Secretary of its Housing Committee in 1935 and 1936, as well as Secretary of the Buffalo Chapter of the American Institute of Architects those same years (He would edit *Empire State Architect* in 1945-46). He moved on to the firm of Frederick Backus, in 1937, where he worked as a draftsman and designer upon receiving his architectural license that year. He became a partner in the firm in 1940.

Crane worked on an impressive range of housing projects, from public housing to military barracks to elite silk stocking district apartments houses. Beginning with the federal Willert Park project in Buffalo in 1939, to the Tudor Plaza and Cathedral Courts apartments of 1947 and 1948, respectively. Crane showed remarkable philosophical consistency when designing apartments, whether for rich or poor. The Tudor Courts and Cathedral Courts apartments, and the Crane Branch Library (named for Crane's father James, a civic leader and one-time councilman) use the same light brown brick as the Willert Park projects, and the same International Style detailing. Roofs are flattened, and canopies extend outlandishly far, resting on spindly rolled pipe in place of masonry columns. All of these things must have caused their paths to cross, and Pearce retained Backus, Crane & Love to design Green Acres in 1949. David Crane was the designer in charge.¹⁴

Whereas Walter Lanphear was charged with stripping away as much architectural detail from historical models to yield a buildable, if two dimensional and boxy, house that spoke of traditional American domesticity, David Crane started with a belief that the rationality of Modernism yielded housing that was beautiful because of its economy and the promise of the machine to better man's lot, whether prince or pauper. It was music to Pearce's ears. Although Crane died unexpectedly in 1953, Pearce & Pearce houses were based on Crane's designs until the company stopped building houses in the 1970's (though by this time public taste had shifted, and Wurlitzer Park of the 1960's saw Pearce & Pearce adding shutters, diamond-paned glass, and other softening agents). Backus, Crane kept Crane's name after his death, and designed an updated three-level house for Pearce in 1957, simply by tucking a garage under David Crane's Fiestas and Sun Valleys.

Crane bent to his task as the ranch house was overtaking the Cape Cod in popularity. Some ascribe its origins to western ranches, although this seems a post hoc label, attached for marketing

¹³ E.B. Green. *Buffalo's Architect*

¹⁴ Broderick Potter, personal interview, 5/27/11.



A Sun Valley ranch house designed by David Crain for Pearce & Pearce. Occupied by the same family across two generations, the Fairlane Road house is unchanged since construction. The Sun Valley, like the Holiday and Villager, had a perfectly rectangular hip roof with wide soffits. The front door, a vertical brick wall plane, and a family room window wall constitute a high-style, well-proportioned Modernism usually absent in mass market ranch houses. Other character-defining features are the striated cedar shake shingles without corner boards, a carport supported by slender pilotis, shallow bedroom and bathroom vent windows for privacy, planter boxes wrapping around a bedroom corner and an off-center chimney at the peak of the roof. Finally, rather than have a porch violate the roof and wall container, the entry is recessed under the main roof.

purposes. More plausibly, the lack of a usable second story summons images of informal vacation retreats, modest rural houses, and a high-style adopting low-style virtues— the Arts and Crafts bungalow: a one-story house by way of India. Wide eaves with exposed rafters, low-pitched roofs, and window bands were common in them all. Frank Lloyd Wright refined this and made it more rational in his Prairie Style houses. It has been suggested that Wright's Barton House in Buffalo was a national inspiration for the ranch house, particularly its snappier, Atomic Age variants.

Crane's Green Acres houses fall into that category. It is a certainty that Crane (like fellow Ivy-Leaguer Lanphear before him with Richardson) studied Wright while in architecture school and



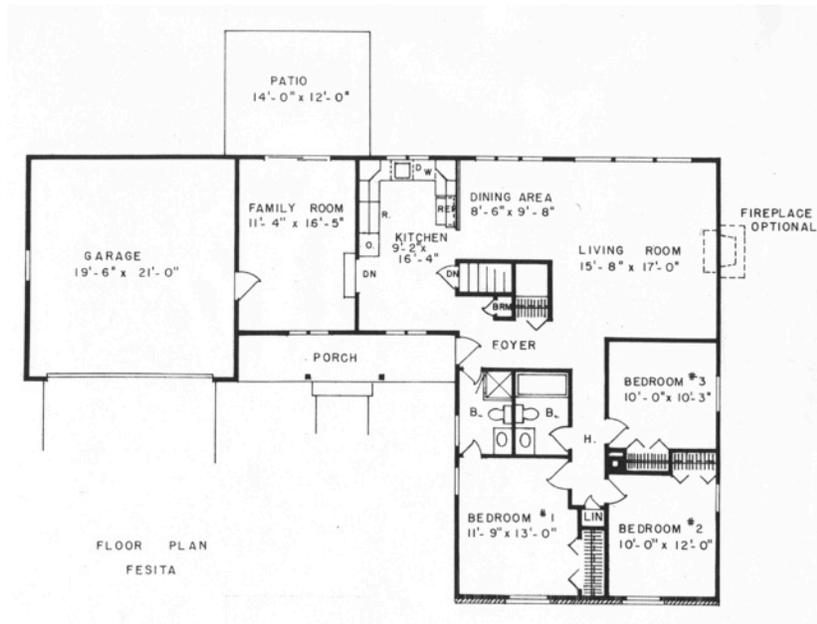
David Crane's Fiesta model for Pearce & Pearce, top; Frank Lloyd EWright's Barton House, left

saw his Buffalo houses in everyday activities around town. The similarities between the Barton House and Crane's Fiesta model (shown above with the gable roof option) are striking, especially if one brings the Barton House down to one story: cross axes, shallow corner windows, window bands, deep

ner windows, window bands, deep

eaves, hip roofs, indirect entry, wall planes, even flower boxes. Not bad on a workingman's budget. Wright's urban prairie houses (if one can stand the oxymoron) were designed for privacy along city streets with short setbacks, but still offer the occupant, neighbors, and the passing public a means to interact spontaneously: the expansive roofed terrace easily visible from the sidewalk. On the Fiesta, this would be the garage.

Crane designed four basic models for Green Acres, the Villager, Holiday, Fiesta, and Sun Valley. They all shared a defining horizontality, wide eaves, bands of shallow bedroom vent windows, cedar shingle siding, floor-to-ceiling living room window walls, low-pitched hip roofs (gable roofs were optional), and distinctively decorated entry doors. On the interior,



Floor plan, Fiesta with family room

the living and dining rooms were merged, and often, the kitchen and a den. The orientation of the social spaces was also toward the back yard. This last feature has its consequences, making quiet streets quieter still.

The Fiesta interior is of a piece with the gradual opening up of the American home from Richardson to Wright and beyond. Not building walls is cheaper than building them, so Pearce could make a virtue out of cost cutting. It is worth noting that one could only go so far. Many buyers chose solid wall and door options where Pearce & Pearce offered wide openings or accordion doors. The Fiesta plan above has an optional family room opening to a concrete slab patio and the backyard. Remarkably, the family room does not open directly onto the front porch, nor does the living room, whose occupants cannot espy arriving visitors, or be aware of passing acquaintances.

The Villager was the most basic model, without a basement, or a garage or carport. The Holiday, Sun Valley, and Fiesta ascended the hierarchy. Sales contracts for Green Acres and Fairlane



An advantage of the cedar shake siding—Weatherbest, manufactured in North Tonawanda—specified by David Crane, was that it was simple to maintain. Children could be trusted to do a good job. With a hip roof, adders were not even needed. Painting pads on poles could easily reach and paint the shakes. The large 13-inch reveal made long, windowless runs seem taller than narrower siding, such as the vinyl siding that has come to be placed on many houses.

roads were analyzed, a total of 130, (about 5% of the total number of houses in Green Acres Village and Green Acres North), and the Holiday model was found to be most popular, with 54 sold, followed by the Villager with 29, the Fiesta with 22, and the Sun Valley with 11. Green Acres Village was generally built from east to west, and most of the houses on Green Acres Road were closed on in 1954. Fairlane, in the western section of the development, was mostly built in 1956.

The Buyers

The files at Pearce and Pearce provide an unprecedented look at who bought what in the 1950's working class suburb. Perace & Pearce has the sales contracts of every house they sold. For 2,500 Green Acres buyers, we can know who bought the house, where they lived when they bought it, what options they wanted, and what mortgage they paid. Cross checking city directories can yield data on age, marital status and children. Several hundred Green Acres properties have more: the applications and credit reports of buyers, with precise income, family, and employment data, and, for most racial data (the Town of Tonawanda in 2010 was 97% white; Green Acres Road buyers—husbands, for the most part—whose race is known were 100% white, and only a handful non-Anglo-Saxon)

Green Acres Road buyers earned between \$70 (a grinder at a screw company) and \$192 per week (a steel mill superintendent, the owner of a dry cleaner's, and the general manager of a downtown women's department store). The amounts in constant dollars can be roughly calculated by multiplying all figures by 8.41 to arrive at 2011 equivalents.¹⁵ The lowest monthly mortgage was \$69 per month (for the grinder's basic Holiday model, with over \$5,000 down on a \$15,000 sale price), the highest \$137 per month for a Holiday model with a extras (over \$20,000, with only \$1,500 down). All of mortgagees met the rule-of-thumb that no more than 25% of a person's gross income should go toward mortgage or rent. In the case of Green Acres Road, the range was 12.3% to 24.5% (for a single man with no dependents) of income. (Two applicants had co-signers, a full-time male student with no income, and a female secretary, with an income of \$50 per week. Both were excluded from income-analyses). The average downpayment was \$2,267 (with a median \$1,555), and the average monthly payment was \$98.43.

¹⁵ from <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>. Retrieved 11/20/11

Were buyers of suburban houses in the 1950's fleeing the cities? Not in the case of Buffalo and Green Acres. Of the 130 buyers on Green Acres Road for whom information is available, just over one-third of the buyers came from the City of Buffalo directly. (Three of applicants listed their addresses in care of employers, all in Buffalo.) One-quarter of the buyers came from nearby Tonawanda and Kenmore, despite a population less than one-tenth that of the city in 1950. The adjacent Town of Amherst had 20 buyers. Further, the bulk of buyers from the city came from areas bordering the northern suburbs. Lastly, buyers were overwhelmingly young veterans establishing households, and almost certainly had never owned a house before. The Green Acres ranches were, quite literally, "starter homes."

In other words, the buyers who were from the city were not selling a house in the city for one in the suburbs. Of the 19 buyers from the City of Buffalo on Green Acres Road whose status is known, 16 were veterans, and only one of these was over 40 years old. A datum not collected, but obtainable from credit reports, would indicate whether buyers were previously renters. This would allow a reasonable conclusion that 1950's buyers from the city were looking to buy a house in an area they were familiar with, and that the availability of thousands of cheap, new houses in the suburbs, which were designed to qualify for Veterans Administration mortgages, made their choice logical. They were not fleeing—they could not have set up house in the city if they had wanted to. (Other dynamics soon came into play in the decision of whether to move out of the city, like urban renewal dislocations, perceived and actual declines in Buffalo schools, etc.)

Ironically, the Town of Tonawanda itself was almost fully built-out by 1960 (at less than one-quarter the population density of Buffalo), and its population barely grew in the next decade. The population has been declining since 1970. The children born in Tonawanda during the 1950's and early 1960's—the baby boomers—found that when they wanted to set up a household, there were few houses available. Their parents were aging in place, and they were aging out of the place.

There is a notion that the 1950's boom in suburban population was due to flight from the central cities. In Buffalo's case, this is difficult to prove. Whatever areas in the city were not already filled with housing became so in the 1950's, with Cape Cod cottages and ranches filling blocks of real estate in North Buffalo near the Kenmore border, and in South Buffalo.

The income range of successful applicants on Green Acres Road was between \$3,600 and \$10,000 annually. Jobs of applicants (the applicants were all men, except for one divorced woman) ranged from entry-level metal workers, carpenters (including a carpenter employed by Pearce & Pearce, who was paid \$80 per week), a Town of Tonawanda patrolman, and salesmen to small-business owners and engineers. There were few professional or white collar buyers.



Michael and Isabel Svisco. The original buyers of a Pearce & Pearce Village at 287 Green Acres Road, they have lived there since the fall of 1954.

Two original Green Acres Village residents were interviewed for this paper. Mrs. Isabel Svisco was already a mother of three with another on the way when she and her husband purchased a Village in 1954. Ev Janish was the young daughter of Ken and Evelyn Janish, owners of the Clarence Diary in the Buffalo.

Isabel Svisco is in her mid-eighties and sharp as a tack, opening her door to complete strangers asking for a moment of her time without an appointment. She answers questions and offers observations at her kitchen table while her husband, nearly 90, relaxes in the living room. Their daughter Sally Ann is visiting from Minnesota and sits in.

Michael Svisco was one of only a handful of mortgagees who were not listed as Anglo-Saxon on his credit report. Listed as Austrian of race, he was, in fact, of Ukranian-Carpathian decent (every Green Acres mortgage reviewed for a Pearce & Pearce home—all by Buffalo Savings Bank—was to a man, with the exception of a divorcee whose father co-signed the loan). Until a 1953 revision, the forms submitted to Pearce & Pearce by its credit reporting agency listed the race of applicants. His wife Isabel was Italian (Caselinuovo). He was 32 when he moved into Green Acres in 1954, and his wife 27. Mike grew up in a small Ukranian neighborhood near the South Grand Island Bridge in

Tonawanda, along the Niagara River and old Erie Canal. The Wickwire steel plant was also nearby, and employed many Hungarians and Ukrainians. Growing up, Mike delivered newspapers there and to houses that formerly lined the canal and river from Tonawanda to Buffalo. He went to work at Wickwire Steel when he was 18. He worked there for over 13 years. He had been a member of the what would become the Air National Guard while working at Wickwire. During the Korean War he and Isabel worried that he would be assigned to a distant base, while she would be forced to take care of two children alone, with a third on the way. Waiting for the shoe to fall within days, he was told instead that the National Guard would be opening a new base in Niagara Falls soon, and he and a friend hustled up there to make sure they were first in line for assignment there. They were, and soon Mike found employment there as an operations supervisor, quitting his job at Wickwire.

It was a 20-mile drive from where Mike and Isabel lived on Roswell Avenue in what is now known as “Old Town” Tonawanda, to the base in the Town of Wheatfield, just east of Niagara Falls. His route was simple: drive west to the end of the block, which was Niagara Street overlooking the river. Turn right, go past the Chevy plant, turn right about a mile up, onto the foot of Sheridan Drive by the Dunlop Tire plant. Follow Sheridan through the dogleg where Two-Mile-Creek Park was, past the Linde Air Products plant, and blast 5 miles straight east on Sheridan to Niagara Falls Blvd., and turn left. Follow the Boulevard 12 more miles and you’re there. On a good day, it could take almost an hour.

It didn’t take Mike long to notice all the new houses going up off Sheridan on the way, but what really caught his eye were the houses going up on the Boulevard. Still close to home, but practically in Niagara County, and a straight shot at that. He and Isabel had seen the ads. They looked at a 4-bedroom Cape Cod the John Fleist company was offering south of Brighton Road, but Isabel didn’t like the idea of two bedrooms downstairs and two upstairs. With four children ahead, she didn’t like the idea of tromping up and down stairs day and night between the bedrooms.

Isabel liked the Pearce & Pearce ranch model instantly. Everything was on one floor, like their current flat, but most of all, she “loved the front windows,” which flooded the living room with morning light. Their current second-floor flat faced north, so the living room and porch never got direct sunlight. There was a full basement. The den could be used a bedroom, and the basement as a rumpus room. All this, for \$14, 600, with \$730 down. The VA-guaranteed mortgage would be \$90 a month. Mike could do it easily on his current income of \$125 a week. The Sviscos were sold. They

paid a \$5.00 deposit to seal the deal.

They changed a few things after moving in. They paved the gravel driveway right away, and within two years had built a two-car garage. The dining area off the kitchen and into the living room was too small to be practical, so they eventually removed a window and made it into storage space. They took all their meals in the kitchen, by



Isabel Svisco, in front of her Green Acres Road home, has witnessed nearly the entire history of history of Green Acres, having been an original resident in 1955.

the window which overlooked the driveway and gave an angled view onto the street. Fifty-five years ago they chose yellow for the kitchen walls. They are still yellow. The original metal kitchen cabinets were recently replaced with wooden ones a relative was able to get for a deal on and install, but Isabel saved some of the old cabinets in the basement.

On the outside the only major change is the vinyl siding installed several years ago when the Svisco's noticed some of the cedar shakes were splitting and getting warped and took the advice to cover it with the vinyl.

Moving in was an exciting time, and the Sviscos, because of the immanence of the birth of their fourth child, held off moving in until the baby was born. The family was the last to move in on the block, and their house had sat empty for a while, becoming the source of neighborhood speculation. The Sviscos had three boys and a girl. Sally Ann was the eldest, and she remembers the welter of schools she attended growing up. With the school-age population booming, new schools were opening and children were shuffled back and forth. Sal recalls attending Lincoln, Franklin and Green Acres elementary schools, Kenmore and Hoover junior high schools, and Kenmore East High School, where she was in the first graduating class. (Between 1947 and 1960, the Kenmore-Tonawanda public school enrollment increased from 7,000 to almost 20,000, and 13 elementary,

schools and two junior high schools were built, and one high school.)¹⁶ Sal became a teacher and now lives in Minnesota. One son is retired from the Air Force, a second son works in maintenance in the GM plant three blocks from the Sviscos original home on Roswell Street, while the youngest son lives in Las Vegas, where he is currently the director of costuming for the long-running Cirque du Soleil show “The Beatles LOVE.”

With the children moved out, the Sviscos found their home still manageable and comfortable and had no reason to leave. The neighborhood has changed over the years, with many fewer children around. This past Halloween, the Sviscos only had two trick-or-treaters, sisters from across the street. Isabel says people are buying houses in Green Acres as retirement homes, and there are a few young couples, each with a job, who you never see. Isabel was for decades an active volunteer in community church groups. She also volunteered in the local Meals on Wheels from its beginnings in the mid-1970’s. Then it had only 30 or so clients. There are now over 300.

The Janish family moved into their Holiday model ranch house with basement in the spring of 1955. Ken Janish was 31 and had been married to Evelyn for five years. He was 1/3 partner in the Clarence Dairy in Buffalo with his brother Robert and father Frank. The Clarence referred to Clarence Street, and Ken and Evelyn lived at the business address in a flat they rented for only \$38 a month. A sweetheart deal, but the two-unit building was probably owned by Ken’s father.

Ev’s first memories are of Sunday inspection tours of the house as it was being built, the yard still a sea of mud. The family moved in, and the yard was still a sea of mud. Ev. got stuck in it one day and her fa-



Ev Janish stands in front of 265 Yorkshire Road in Green Acres in spring 1955. The family would take Sunday drives out to the house for regular inspections

¹⁶ Settlement to Suburb, A History of the Town of Tonwanda, p. 179

ther had to haul her out from a plank path and leave her boots behind in the sucking mud. The Holiday had a rectangular roof over a stepped plan. In front, flush with the roof edge, were two bedrooms. Set five feet back under the cantilevered roof was the front door and the kitchen with a row of three vent windows looking onto the street. That is, if you were standing up. Sitting down at the built-in Dormolux breakfast nook, you could just see sky. If you were standing at the sink, though, you could hold a wide swath of the immediate neighborhood under surveillance, because another band of vent windows met the first at the corner and extended back into the open carport.

You'd feel like you were the captain of a ship, keeping eye on things from a command post. The carport was only 13 feet deep—any car would stick out beyond the kitchen wall, but hopefully still be under the roof overhang. The Janish family sedans did, but just barely (photo right).



The carport and kitchen windows, 1964

The kitchen extended, in a way, all the way to the back of the house, where there was a dining area. From the dining area there was an open connection to the living room. So there was an interior el of kitchen-dining area-living room. The living room had a window wall looking out onto the back yard—but no door to the yard! In fact, there was no door from any room out into



The carport walls installed in 1968, with Evelyn Janish's window in place

the backyard.

One day in 1968 it was decided to wall in the carport to the edge of the eaves, but Ev's mother insisted that her views from the front kitchen windows be unobstructed, so an old window was placed in the freestanding carport wall that extended out from the kitchen. Mom could still cover all the angles.

The car, or rather, lack of two cars, was a problem for the Janishes, and Ev recalled it as a "monster debate." She explained, "My father didn't want my mother to have a car, he didn't think it was necessary, but it was. When my father's hours were exceedingly long, it was difficult." Ev's mother could not easily go grocery shopping without a car because there was no grocery store within walking distance. The argument was settled when Ev's grandfather gave her mother his old car in 1964. "that car really liberated my Mom," Ev recalled. (the kids didn't need cars to be driven around: "Me and my bike were inseperable," said Ev. My mother would send me to get things on my bike in an emergency, we would bike up to Ellicott Creek Park.")

The absence of the car had other, more sinister consequences. Since every every household had to have at least one car, and many had two, the presence of a car in the carport, visible to all, was evidence that someone was home. Having no car in the carport was a sign that no one was home. One year, in the early 1970's, the Janishes went away on vacation. When they returned home, they discovered that thieves had broken into the house through a rear window and taken whatever cash was in the house that Ken had from the company dairy routes.

Ken reported the theft to the police. Then they Janishes were broken into again when the family was gone. And again. Someone was watching the house. Ken finally gave up even reporting the thefts. Then, with Ken's car gone but Evelyn and the girls home, a man walked up the driveway and turned around when he belatedly saw someone looking out a window. From then on, the family arranged to have a male friend or relative over while Ken was out. But it couldn't continue, and in 1973 the family moved to Depew and the thefts stopped.

Ev moved out of the Buffalo area in adulthood, but has just moved back after 38 years away. She is retiring to an updated Pearce & Pearce Holiday model in Wurlitzer Park.



Pearce & Pearce lobby, 2003

Conclusion

The ranch house, despite the disdain of architectural critics or invisibility to them, provided many advantages to builders and buyers. That many of them remain virtually unchanged from the day they were built is testimony to its suitability for a certain segment of the American market over a 60-year span of time. Further, the environmental and social faults often ascribed to the ranch house has more to do with 1950's zoning and land use laws, rather than the design of the house itself. Finally, the immediate post-war boom in close-in suburban housing was not driven by people fleeing the city, but rather pent-up demand following depression and war, with existing suburban residents buying a disproportionate share of Green Acres houses.

Appendix

Pearce & Pearce housing developments

Prior to Green Acres Village:

Harris Hill, Clarence and Amherst

Audubon Terrace, Snyder

Kingsgate Village, Snyder,

Longmeadow Village, Amherst

Getzville Road, Harris Hill.

Lincoln Park Village, 500 single-family houses, plus 300 duplexes

Green Acres and Green Acres North, approx. 2500 houses

Wurlitzer Park Village, North Tonawanda, 600 houses

The Village Green, Amherst, 125

Sandhurst, Amherst, 100

Barclay Square, Amherst, 200

Briarhurst South, Amherst, 200

Woodstream Farms, 100

Forest Glen, Hamburg, 50

Woodbury, Amherst, 50

Meadowstream, Amherst, 50

Colony Court, Amherst, 25

Brandywine, Amherst

Chapel Woods West, Amherst

Apartment complexes: Bowdoin Square, Amherst; Lincoln Square, Tonawanda

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