

A CENTURY AGO WESTFIELD BECAME A TOWN, EVEN THEN IT HAD CHARM

BY MARCIE R. HOROWITZ

The headline in the *Union County Standard* newspaper edition of March 6, 1903 read: "The Governor Signs Bill That Incorporates The Town Of Westfield." The ads on the same page of the paper were great. J.W. Singer on Prospect Street advertised a fancy prime rib roast for 16 cents per pound. J. Wiss & Sons advertised solid gold eyeglasses for \$1 per pair. That was 102 years ago when Westfield became a town.

In Union County, New Jersey, there are eight townships, seven boroughs, five cities — and just one town, the Town of Westfield. How did Westfield become a "town"? Who made that choice, and why? What were the consequences of that decision?

On January 27, 1794, Westfield formally separated from Elizabethtown and was "made a separate township — to be called the Township of Westfield." At the time, Westfield was a rural community that included one Presbyterian Church, approximately fourteen houses, one store, one blacksmith shop, one tavern and one schoolhouse.

In his book, "A History of the Town of Westfield, Union County, New Jersey" (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1923), Charles A. Philhower wrote that the town "had been in substantially this condition for nearly a century... There was absolutely no growth."

As written by James P. Johnson, *Westfield: from Settlement to Suburb* (Westfield Bicentennial Committee, 1977), the arrival of the railroad, and the beginnings of the industrial revolution, marked a turning point in the history of Westfield. The first train passed through Westfield in 1838, and by the 1860s, the Central Railroad of New Jersey enabled passengers to ride from Westfield to Jersey City (and thence by ferry to lower Manhattan). The railroad promoted Westfield as a fine place to live; a sales brochure promised that commuters would travel in "luxurious palace coaches."

An 1894 brochure similarly boasted that, "Westfield, indeed, hath charms. Where in the wide, wide world is the grass greener, the sky bluer, or the air purer? Why, the very exhilaration of such an atmosphere sets every nerve a tingle, and the whole world aglow."

The last two decades of the 19th Century saw a rush to progress in Westfield. In 1882, the population of the township was 875; by 1900, the population had climbed to over 4,000 (Philhower, p. 53).

The incorporation of Summit City in 1899 provided the spark that inspired the Westfield Sound Money Club to consider changing the form of government. In November 1900, the club disbanded and the Good Government Club, was established instead.

A public meeting held to discuss the issue drew a "large attendance." (*Union County Standard*, December 18, 1900.) The attendees arranged an advisory election of "all legal voters who voted in Westfield at the last election" to vote on whether or not to incorporate as a city.

On one side, proponents of city government foresaw progress, employment, and

growth. "Summit already has several times as much money and is rapidly beating us in population." (*Union County Standard*, January 4, 1901). In the same issue of the newspaper, another columnist took the opposing view. He urged that Westfield could have everything it wanted "and much more without any change of government."

Public sentiment was against any change and a few weeks later, the voters overwhelmingly rejected the proposal. The issue was dropped for over a year.

In 1902, the question of Westfield's government was raised anew, and by early 1903 the issue was again being vigorously debated. Some residents were concerned that taxes would rise if Westfield became a city. Others argued that tax dollars would be better and more wisely spent if Westfield were a city.

On January 23, 1903, the Westfield Local Government Committee submitted its report summarizing the advantages and disadvantages of the township,

borough, and city forms of government to city council. A city could control the licensing of saloons (excise power) and the use of the streets. It also would have greater power to pass ordinances and to enforce them. In a city, the council could raise money by taxation. In a township, appropriations required approval by the voting public.

At a public meeting one week later, the idea of becoming a town was raised (or at least reported on) for the first time. This was a new, compromise position supported, it seems, by those who preferred the city form of government but realized their proposal was not going to carry the day.

The Westfield Manual was written by Thompson and Taggart, who were two of the town leaders just after the town was finally incorporated in 1903. The manual explained, "Under the Town, the schools would still be independent, while in a city they would be a part of the municipal system. The dread which some had of the name 'city,' it forebode greater opportunity for misgovernment."

In a matter of weeks, legislation was drawn up and was under consideration in Trenton. On March 4, 1903, the State Legislature passed Chapter 14 of the Laws of 1903 pursuant to which Westfield became a "town." That is where the matter stands today, a century later.

Westfield's decision to become a town was more than a simple choice between two statutory forms of government. Westfield's "growing pains" reflect the overall shift in America at the turn of the 19th Century from a rural to an urban society. The heated controversy that surrounded the decision suggests that, to the people of the time, the decision to become a "city" or a "town" was a symbolic act as well, fraught with emotion and colored by the residents' aspirations and fears.

Westfield as a town, not a city, no longer a rural village, set a course for itself as the quintessential New Jersey suburb it has become today.

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