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## The Benson Architectural Legacy In Chestnut Hill (part one)

Posted on January 24, 2020 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/01/24/the-benson-architectural-legacy-in-chestnut-hill-part-one/>), updated on January 24, 2020 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/01/24/the-benson-architectural-legacy-in-chestnut-hill-part-one/>) by Contributor (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/contributor/>)

The Benson family has lived in or near Chestnut Hill for some six generations, with many family members here today. Over those generations, they built or owned a number of interesting houses, creating an important architectural legacy. Some houses are gone, but others happily remain today.

Let's start with one of their prominent ancestors during the Revolutionary War, Lieutenant Colonel Caleb North (1753-1840). Born in Chester County, he was a merchant in Coventry, PA when not in the army. During the Revolutionary War, he served in various regiments through the battles of Paoli, Germantown and Monmouth, among others, and as a field officer under General Washington. In 1819, he settled his large family into Philadelphia.

His daughter Sarah North (born 1798) married Alexander Benson (1794-1870), who was originally from Baltimore. Benson also had family members who had fought in the Revolution. He started working at his father's dry goods business in Philadelphia but moved into banking, eventually establishing the noted firm of Alexander Benson & Sons.

Their son, Edwin North Benson (1840-1909), was the first in the family to buy property in Chestnut Hill. After Episcopal Academy and the University of Pennsylvania, he joined his father's banking house. During the Civil War, he continued the family tradition of military service. After the War, he returned to banking in a period of rapid economic expansion, which required financing. He retired early in 1870, the same year his father died, apparently leaving him a considerable fortune.



The second house bought by Edwin North Benson, Sr., known as Lynnewood Cottage. The architect is unknown but it was designed in a "Carpenter Gothic" style, circa 1845.

Demolished. Photo courtesy of Perry Benson.

In the following decades he became active in Republican politics in Philadelphia, including serving as president of the Electoral College that elected the unlucky

President James Garfield in 1880 (who was assassinated only six months into his term). Benson also served as president of the Union League from 1884-1888.

He also turned to buying and building comfortable country houses for his family.

The first houses bought by the Benson family in Chestnut Hill were constructed as part of the early wave of residential construction within easy distance of what is now the Chestnut Hill East station, which opened in 1854.

Around 1871, the Bensons bought a large existing French Second Empire house just down the road at 115 Bethlehem Pike, built circa 1850-60. With a Mansard roof and wrap-around porches, it was sited to take advantage of the extensive views and cooling breezes of the Whitemarsh Valley. Records suggest that the house may have originally been called Lynwood, but later became known as Lynnewood or Lynnewood Hall.



The original house at the Benson property, photo circa 1870. This house burned and was replaced by the far larger Lynnewood Hall. (Courtesy of the Archives at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy)

Benson soon expanded their holdings by buying the adjacent property at 185 Bethlehem Pike, including a stone "Carpenter Gothic" style house that had likely been built circa 1845. Various members of the family lived in that house over the years. In 1889, Benson's mother-in-law, Mrs. Alexander Wray, is recorded as living there. It was known as Lynnewood Cottage.

His sister, Harriet North Benson, bought another large French Second Empire house called Norwood nearby on Germantown Pike that was built originally in 1852. That house was gradually expanded by Miss Benson and survives today as the original building of what is now the Norwood-Fontbonne School.

So the family enjoyed a group of comfortable country houses within close proximity to each other and the growing village of Chestnut Hill. Sadly, the Benson's main house burned to the ground in 1883.

He immediately turned to building another house on the same site. That new house, known either as Lynnewood or Lynnewood Hall, is believed to have been the largest house in Chestnut Hill when it was completed. But we must wait until next week to learn about that house.

Part Two of this article will appear next week.

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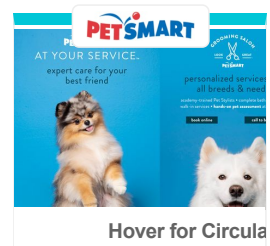
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