

Alice Levin Ahead of Her Time

Many good things can be said about the legacy of Wiltonian Alice Levin, who passed away in May at the age of 92, but as a protector of the open fields, untouched forests and pristine streams of our town, she was a visionary.

Alice first came to Wilton in 1929 on visits to her grandmother who resided in an old tavern built in 1807 which served travelers along Ridgefield Road as they journeyed between Norwalk and North Salem. Even though Alice declared herself a Manhattanite long after she moved to Wilton following World War II, somewhere in her young, city-dwelling imagination she developed a respect for nature and a deep connection to the land. The following story, pieced together from old correspondence saved by Alice for fifty years, is a glimpse into the thinking of someone ahead of her time:

In 1966, Alice and her husband Peter led a group of Wilton citizens in an attempt to balance the checkerboard methods of dividing land for residential development with the need to preserve the connectedness of the woods, fields, streams, hills and swamps of Wilton. They realized that a simple shift of looking at a place *as a whole region* rather than as individual 2-acre boxes could protect the beauty of the land and increase the value of the adjacent developed areas. To Alice and Peter, by avoiding the desecration of the natural terrain, not only would private value go up but *public* value would go up along with it. They also knew that by making the public value of a place part of the local process of land-use decisions, they'd give people a sense of thinking responsibly on behalf of the whole community. In Alice's own words, protected would be "land with trails and natural vistas, streams of steady and pure flow, much undisturbed swampland, and wooded acreages in differing stages of evolution".

In a document produced by the Levins, "Proposal for Cooperative Landholding & Development", dated September 14, 1966, a comprehensive vision was put forward for about 300 acres which included "the longest stretch of natural valley in Wilton" and which would "preserve the character and pattern developed long before the advent of zoning". It was intended for the current property owners whose land was at risk for subdivision with the hope of cooperatively achieving the twin objectives of preserving a portion of the land for privacy, recreation, and the enjoyment of nature while also increasing profits for the developers—in short, a win for everyone. The document was presented to the landowners one-by-one and concluded with the simple question, "Will you or will you not participate"? In the end, alas, not a single positive response resulted.

Today, land-use planners know that it's not development that causes problems, only *patterns* of development. In the case of the conventional checkerboard, some of the best land for home sites is wasted. In addition, if smaller parcels were used for houses, it would reduce the cost of roads, utilities, and sewage and allow for open space. Today we have "set asides" required by subdivision zoning laws. These produce small isolated fragments of land of dubious value for use as a park or recreation space. On the other hand, streams and wetlands, not suitable for housing yet often included in our building lots—and what the Levins were asking to preserve—are ecosystems vital to the health of wildlife, plants and people. What Alice and Peter wanted was the flexibility to think about the whole landscape and not just the individual parcels, giving everyone more of what they wanted in the first place.

Eventually, this episode of planning for a better Wilton came to naught and was forgotten—except by Alice. Just weeks before she passed away, a yellowed file of typewritten notes appeared on her coffee table in the off chance that someone would pick it up and possibly tell her story. You see, Alice always wanted to be an example for others. The way she looked at it, it wasn't about her but about the lessons she could pass along. In the end she hoped that someone would see what she saw—the beauty of Wilton's natural resources and the possibility of working together to preserve them for our children.