

The Wesley House

This apartment building on Wesley Avenue was once the private home of Edward Barton Wesley. The building is pictured here, as it stands today, on Wesley Avenue in Port Chester. It is actually sitting on it's original 1860's foundations, but the house itself has been altered over the years into many individual apartments.

Edward Barton Wesley's life is a real rags-to-riches story. He is one of the most important people to ever call Port Chester home. But his story is not well-known.



E.B. Wesley, as he came to be known, was born in Leicester, Massachusetts, in January of 1811. He came from a family of modest means, but even as a young man, Edward had big plans. In 1824, newspapers carried the extraordinary headline that General Lafayette, hero of the American Revolution and close friend of George Washington, would be visiting Leicester. Edward gathered up his mother's cherished and valuable silver hat pins, and sold them to attendees, planning to run away to Manhattan. He was 13 years old, and against all odds and his parent's knowledge, he made it to Manhattan.

The ambitious Edward immediately found ways to stay in New York City. He sold sandwiches to the ferry passengers arriving in NYC from Albany. He was soon selling the passengers bank notes, making a small profit each time. Bank notes were becoming popular ways to avoid carrying heavy coins; today we call it "paper money". By 1840 Edward had a number of equally ambitious young men working for him, always making new contacts with banks and wealthy investors. He even printed his own pamphlets and financial "hints", always looking for a way to connect to the financial leaders of NYC.

In 1850, at the age of 39, Edward pooled all his money with George Jones. The combined investment was \$40,000.00, and incredible sum of money for the time, even more incredible when you consider how he amassed it. The two men had decided to form a Newspaper printing company. That paper was called **The New York Times**. Edward was the first Managing Director. By 1861, he decided that he was wealthy enough to retire at age 50, and sold his interest in the newspaper for one million dollars. By that time he had achieved fame as one of the most prosperous investors on Wall Street. He had also founded the New York Globe, a newspaper with huge circulation, and he was also one of the founders of the Union Trust Bank, Hamden Bank, and others. Banks at that time had the right to print money, a practice that was ended by Millard Fillmore in 1866 while he was New York State Comptroller. Fillmore was later was elected President of the United States.

E.B. began looking for a country home to spend his summers away from NYC. In 1853, while maintaining homes in Buffalo and NYC, he had began purchasing land in Port Chester, on what he considered to be the highest point with magnificent views of Long Island Sound. Port Chester at that time was still mostly farmland, with a handful of wealthy NYC families spending their summers there. The downtown areas were more residential, with factory owners living side-by-side with horse and carriage manufacturers, iron foundries, sea captains and lumber mills along the coast line. He began constructing his home in the 1860's enlarging and adding to it, until the property was about 90 acres, stretching from North Regent Street almost down to Ridge Street along Westchester Avenue. The final mansion was completed in 1872, and he began living there year-round.

Port Chester, 1882.

The Wesley property is at the top left, along North Regent Street. The house has been enlarged, and some additional floors added, but the tower in the picture is still there. The street on the left is Irving Avenue, which ended at North Regent Street at the time. In the middle of the picture in "Deermont", the Peyton Estate. At the bottom of the picture is the Port Chester High School which used to stand on the corner of Irving and Haseco Avenue. Just a few buildings from this picture are still standing.



By 1900, the Wesley Estate was fully developed with the main house, private roads, and a few additional buildings. At 41 acres it was still one of the largest estates in Port Chester. Much of the land had been sold by then to Port Chester developers who were building houses non-stop. The Port Chester Golf and Country Club would soon be sold to Port Chester by John Lyon, for the "new" High School.



Edward enjoyed life in Port Chester and was an active member of the community. He, his wife Elizabeth Kelley (they married in 1836) and their six children were well-known and admired for their civic activities. His children had all been born in Buffalo, before Edward achieved his wealth and fame, and they seemed to appreciate their good fortune in life and shared it without reservation. E.B. lived a long and productive life by any account, and died at the estate on Oct 3, 1906, in his 96th year.

The Estate after E.B.

The family stayed on at the Estate but a series of events after 1906 would change things for them in dramatic ways. E.B.'s children were beginning to move away; his daughter Ida Wesley, who was born in Port Chester June 14, 1854, stayed on. After 1906, she managed the house and grounds for years before moving to Mount Vernon with her husband Charles Albert Breck. World War 1 also took its toll; Ida's son Samuel Perry Breck was killed in Bony, France. Ida could not maintain the estate any longer. As one of her last acts as co-owner, Ida deeded a portion of the property to Port Chester as a Memorial Park, to be dedicated to the soldiers of WW1, in honor of her son Perry. She also had his name permanently honored, in the creation of Perry Avenue and Breckenridge Avenue.

In 1922 the estate was sold at auction to William Ryan for \$33,655.00. Ryan purchases a number of additional lots in the area, and makes elaborate plans for new streets and houses. Ryan however does not live to see it happen; he died February 18, 1925 without a will. (He buried at St. Mary's.) His estate becomes a legal nightmare for his family. Bit by bit, lots are sold. The house was converted to apartments in the early 1930's. One of the original stone barns still stands on Perry Avenue, now used as a house.

Some Interesting Trivia

Wesley was instrumental, even controversial, in bringing paper money to North Castle. On March 14, 1861, E.B. and four other investors, were granted a license to form the Hampden Bank. That very day, the bank ordered a full plate of One, Two, and Five Dollar notes, with notice that he would print 12,000 impressions of each. At the time, each duly licensed US Bank could print their own money. It was a system that nearly bankrupted thousands, and was eventually outlawed, but not before some early investors made millions. The Bank, along with many others, was shut down in 1866. ("North Castle History" Vol 18)



Edward B. Wesley, President of the Hampden Bank. Picture from the book "Notable New Yorkers, 1896-1899," by Moses King, 1899, courtesy of Richard N. Lander.

The auction of the Estate was published in the New York Times, on April 30, 1922. "One of the oldest landmarks in Westchester County will go on the auction block on May 20, when Bryan L. Kennelly, Inc., sells the Port Chester Estate of Edward B. Wesley, one of the three founders of the New York Times. The property consists of forty-one acres, a large fire-proof residence, two smaller houses, a stone barn and garage and various other buildings in Port Chester. The mansion, built by the late Edward B. Wesley in 1872, is 90 by 50 feet, of brick and concrete, and has twenty-two rooms, a wide hall extending through the first floor, and a spacious billiard room on the top floor. The Wesley or Breck estate, as this property has been successively known is one of the oldest private preserves in this vicinity. It was purchased by the late E.B. Wesley in 1853, and has been in the family ever since. The property will be divided in 505 city lots and will be sold at absolute auction on the premises by Bryan L. Kennelly, Inc."

E.B. Wesley was the son of Alexander Wesley (1775-1828) and Mary A. Barton (1787-1889). He was born on January 10, 1811 in Leicester, Worcester, Massachusetts.

E.B. Wesley married **Elizabeth Kelley** on December 8, 1936. She was born August 8, 1820 in New York City. In the book "Where the Wild Strawberries Grow", author Dale Pitzen describes E.B.'s improbably rise to fame and fortune. Elizabeth died at the house in early January, 1896, at the age of 76. She also came from humble, but ambitious beginnings. Her father William P. Kelley was a dry-goods merchant in New York City, having moved there before Elizabeth's birth, from Buffalo, NY. She and E.B. were members of Christ Church, in Rye.

E.B. and Elizabeth had six children, but only two (**Joanna** and **Ida**) lived into adulthood and survived them. Their children are:

- 1) Mary Elizabeth Wesley, born 9/29/1837 in Buffalo, died 3/22/1852, age 15.
- 2) John Edwin Wesley, born 10/09/1839 in Buffalo, died 09/15/1861, age 22.
- 3) **Joanna Caroline (Wesley) Brown**, born 03/09/1846 in Buffalo, died 11/02/1899, age 53.
- 4) Ella Jeanette Wesley, born 05/25/1848 in Buffalo, died 04/03/1868, age 20.
- 5) Lillian Florence Wesley, born 12/19/1853 in Port Chester, died 06/30/1870, age 17
- 6) **Ida Agnes (Wesley) Breck**, born 06/14/1854 in Port Chester, died 1943, age 88.

Ida Agnes Wesley, and her husband Charles Breck, are both buried at **Kensico Cemetery, Valhalla**.

There is also a memorial there to their only child **Samuel Perry Breck**, who died in WW1 in France.



Ida's sister Joanna married first a Mr. Parsons, in an elaborate wedding ceremony described in "The Churchman" volume 75. The article says: "The beautiful and costly marble altar and reredos, presented by Mr. E.B. Wesley, in memory of his wife Elizabeth, on behalf of his daughters, Joanna C. Parsons and Ida A. Breck, were consecrated on Sunday, March 14, by Bishop Talbot." (1897). She later married Edwin Sandstom Brown, and had eight children. Her descendants are the last living members of the family of E.B. and Elizabeth Wesley.

The house was apparently put into use as a temporary "hospital", possibly during the Flu or diphtheria pandemics of the early 1900's. While no actual records exist, there is an interesting article dated June 6, 1925, in which Jerome Peck, Atty., appears on behalf of Port Chester in a lawsuit brought at Westchester County. Port Chester was opposed to the "conversion of a private hospital into a family apartment house on the grounds that it would give fine chances to saxophone players". (The Evening Independent, June 26, 1925).