

A History of the Development of Riverwoods



Here in the farthest corner of New Castle is Riverwoods, 125 acres of winding streets and graceful houses. A peaceful enclave that has everything except noise. The residents of Riverwoods live in their own homes without the burden of keeping a tidy lawn or shoveling snow on a frosty morning. When summer comes, there is no need to travel miles for a swim or a game of tennis: the pool and the courts are right here.

Riverwoods consists of 148 condominiums, complete with a club house, two swimming pools, indoor and outdoor, and tennis courts. It was built on the grounds of a long-ago golf course: the Kisco River Golf Club. A nine-hole course, its topography must have made playing there a challenge. Like many others, the club closed in the 1930s, a victim of the Depression, and in the 1940s the property was bought by Dr. Jules Koch and his family.

Dr. Koch turned the former club house into his family residence, leaving the rest of the property in its natural state. The house, with many additions and renovations, is still standing in the area between the entrance and the exit to Riverwoods. The Koch family lived there until the 1980s. At that time, Mrs. Koch, then a widow, sold the property to developer Harvey S. Shapiro of Manhattan. In the intervening fifty years, the golf course had gradually turned itself into a woodland.

Shapiro had an ambitious plan to build a high-quality condominium development of 170 units on the property. He envisioned small clusters of attached houses along lanes and roads fanning out from a central drive through the development. The

houses, of traditional design, would not be identical, but would be similar enough to make a harmonious streetscape. They would have colonial features such as bay windows, shutters, and dormers. Every living room would have a working fireplace, and every unit would have a deck overlooking the woods. Buyers could choose from several floor plans and number of bedrooms. A unique feature was the connection of the condominiums by their garages, so there were no party walls, assuring soundproofing and privacy. In fact, this design element won the development an architectural award. Most important, the development would preserve its natural setting, enhanced by carefully designed landscaping around the houses and along the streets. A river walk would be an added feature.

First, of course, these plans had to pass through the Town of New Castle Planning Board. For Shapiro, the Planning Board meetings began in 1983 when his preliminary plans were first submitted. Initially, the project was called Fox Hollow Run. The name, Riverwoods, shorter and more descriptive, was chosen almost at the very end of the planning process.

The New Castle Planning Board examines all new construction for wetlands, density, traffic, etc. The Fox Hollow Run project was the subject of intense scrutiny because of its being a multi-family development in a somewhat rural residential area. The site itself was difficult, as it was to be built on both sides of a river in a very hilly terrain. Furthermore, its ingress and egress came off Croton Avenue, a narrow, curving road, which was used to very little traffic.

The undisturbed nature of the property and its beauty seemed to inspire feelings of protection from many sources. Residents along Croton Ave and an organization called The Friends of the Kisco River were just two of the groups that followed the meetings intently. The entrance and exit off Croton Avenue were shifted several times, often just a few yards, to satisfy traffic safety and the concerns of the street's residents.

Water issues such as sewage, hydrants, and wetlands protection had to be addressed by thoughtful planning. The sharp changes in grade required careful attention to the placement of buildings and driveways. Every incline was measured and evaluated. The proposed walk along the river, a favorite amenity, loved and defended by many, was reluctantly abandoned. It would have required the elimination of forty trees, an intolerable loss. The total number of units was lowered to 148 from the original 170.

Eventually, enough changes and compromises had been discussed and debated that all parties came to an agreement. The project, with its new name, Riverwoods,

was given final approval in January 1986. Shapiro formed Riverwoods Chappaqua Corp., an entity which he controlled, to carry out the project and act as the sponsor, selling the condominium units.

Shapiro had hired David Smotrich, a highly respected architect, to design the houses and their placement along the streets. Smotrich was a Harvard trained architect who had clients all over the world. At the start of his career, he worked for I.M. Pei and then went on to form his own company. He and his family lived in Chappaqua and he was able to spend many days at the site, watching as his designs came to life.

Harvey Shapiro began construction immediately, and sales were brisk from the very beginning. As soon as they were constructed, the houses were bought and occupied. Smotrich's attractive designs and Shapiro's high-quality construction, not to mention the beautiful woodland setting, had enormous appeal. There was no other development with these features so well realized.

Just when everything was going full speed ahead, the stock market crashed in October 1987 but recovered surprisingly quickly, and Shapiro kept on with the construction, laying out the roads and selling new houses. However, in late 1988 - early 1989, the real estate market weakened and disaster struck. Although Shapiro and the sponsor never formally filed for bankruptcy, construction stopped and Shapiro defaulted on his financial obligations to his lenders and to the Riverwoods condominium. Bills were not paid and monthly maintenance on unsold units, required to be paid by the sponsor, was not forthcoming. Thanks to strong actions on the part of a small team of homeowners Shapiro finally relinquished control in favor of the condominium association.

Construction stopped at Ruxton Road: everything above that was entirely untouched. The existing homeowners found themselves living on a deserted construction site, with unfinished houses, open holes where foundations had been dug, unfinished roadways, and abandoned heavy equipment scattered about. The future of the development was unclear, but precarious.

In a remarkable demonstration of organizational skill and dedication, the fifty families already occupying homes on the property managed to collect the maintenance fees, pay the bills, and keep their houses and the roads in good shape. To protect their interests, they filed liens against the unsold units. The Marine Midland Bank, which held the mortgage on the property foreclosed in 1994. The preservation of the project by the then owners allowed the bank time to find a developer willing to carry out the original plans.

The residents who lived through this period when their entire investment and their very homes were at risk, shake their heads at the memory of those years. Yet they also recall how the fifty families rallied to form a close and supportive community. They also remember the great parties they had that helped to ease the anxiety of the situation.

Eventually, a new developer, Spectrum Construction, a large construction company of good reputation, acquired the property. This developer finished the partially constructed houses, paved the roads, and planted the landscaping. The unfinished houses were completed according to the original design, but some interiors were modified to a more open plan that had become popular. The club house, swimming pools and the tennis courts had been built by Shapiro but not yet opened.

Riverwoods is divided into 4 sections, called phases. Phase one houses are those that were finished under Harvey Shapiro. The remaining three were all completed by Spectrum. As the development came to life again, sales resumed.

Today Riverwoods is a well-loved and well respected home to a variety of residents from families with children to retirees. People of all ages walk the loop that winds through the gentle hills and woods, crossing the Kisco River at two points, the North and South Bridges. The walk is a natural cardio work out, requiring only comfortable shoes and a jacket. Those troubled years in its past seem unimaginable.

Riverwoods' operation is under the direction of professional managers. However, the homeowners' association, with elected representatives from each of the four phases, keeps watch over the financial and general welfare of the residents.

Those who live here can watch the woods change as the seasons pass. In Autumn the trees blaze with reds and oranges, in the winter, the snow is a gentle blanket overall. The spring brings its promise of renewal and the leaves and flowers return. In summer, it is like spring only hot. Nature is always just outside the window, or across from the deck.

The story goes that when the property was a golf course, after the golfers were finished with their play, the caddies would jump in the river for a swim. Apparently, it was deeper then. No swimming now, but what was known as The Mighty Kisco River still flows through the development, moving smoothly around the rocks in the dry periods, rushing and foaming after a heavy rain. The river, the trees, the old stone walls that ramble through the woods are a beautiful setting.

David Smotrich has gone to his final resting place. If he could see Riverwoods today, he surely would be pleased to see his vision realized. Whether returning from a long day's work in the city, a tropical vacation, or an expedition to scale Mt. Everest, Riverwoods is so nice to come home to.

Nancy O'Neil

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