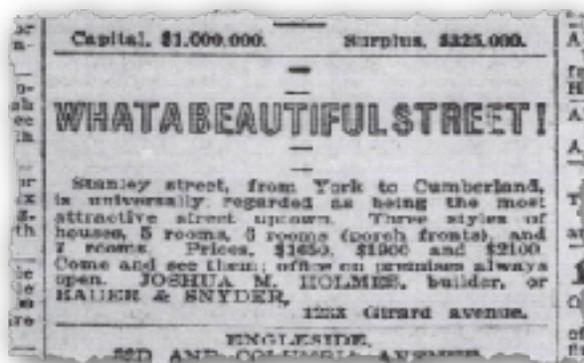


## CUSTIS WOODS: The Evolution of a Suburban Neighborhood

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Joshua Miskey Holmes was born in South Charleston Ohio in July of 1860. It is not known why or when he moved to Philadelphia, but it appears to have been a family move soon after the 1870 census, perhaps back to his mother's native Pennsylvania. As a young adult he worked as a carpenter in Philadelphia. Later in his 20s, he appears to have been an energetic and hard working craftsman, eventually buying and "flipping" houses in central Philadelphia wards. His maternal grandmother died in November of 1890 and Joshua served as the executor of her will, collecting a fee and inheriting her valuable holdings in the Lehigh Valley Railroad. In early 1891, his brother John died and Joshua again served as executor of his will.

Joshua married a resident of Winchester Virginia, Sallie Ackley, in February of 1892. The financial boost from his service as an executor likely led to his investment in property in the fast growing flatland northwest of City Hall known as Strawberry Mansion. A headline in *The Inquirer* of October 18, 1894, indicated that Joshua had begun an "operation" of 18 14'x28' houses at the clumsily named "Thirty-second and Three Quarters Street" and York Street. His development included a three-story store and dwelling on the northwest corner. (Now a parking lot.) The odd street name was a result of the division of larger blocks in the planned city-street grid with the addition of new streets between the planned numbered streets in order to create smaller lots and therefore more affordable housing for the working class. After development was completed, the city changed the name to Douglas Street. Other such oddly named streets in the neighborhood were also granted new names at the beginning of the 20th century.



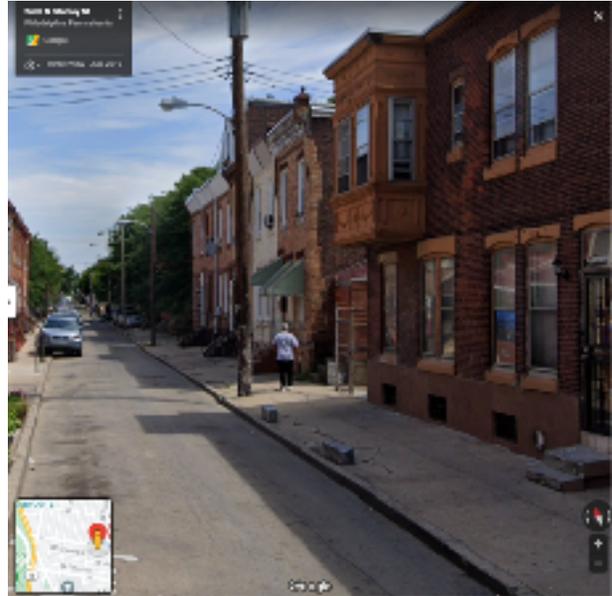
*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 3, 1897

Street" and went on to claim it as "universally regarded as being the most attractive street uptown." The "homey" nature of this ad and those that appeared over the next decade suggest that the carpenter himself composed the ads.

In late 1897, he began another project on nearby Myrtlewood Street.

By 1899, an article in *The Inquirer* boasted of a new 70-house development on Dover Street between Huntingdon and Cumberland Streets. An even larger development of 140 houses was announced in late 1899 on Newkirk Street. An ad early in 1901 proclaimed “Everyone thinking of buying a home should see mine.” The price for these “finely furnished well-built houses” jumped to \$4,800, or \$4,500 without the porch.

In the early years of the 20th century, the now-affluent Joshua joined other Philadelphia industrialists in the move to Cheltenham Hills, leaving his long-standing rental home at 12th and Girard. (Now a parking lot.) In October of 1905, he procured a stately home just over the city line on Valley and Sharpless Roads in Cheltenham Township that had been part of Edward M. Davis’ Oak Farm. His household included his wife Sallie, daughter Elizabeth Vashti, and son Joshua, Jr., six years younger, born on April 27, 1899.



Holmes’ homes on his “beautiful street”, Stanley Street, today. Google.

Also at the turn of the century, Joshua Sr. moved his operations to Germantown and developments in the next decade emerged in rapid-fire succession:

- in 1902, purchasing land along the new Apsley Street between Wayne Avenue and Greene Street. Thirty-four three-story houses were planned for the site.
- An additional operation in Germantown began in late 1908 on Keyser Street, which was expanded to include Knox Street, Manheim, and Hansberry Streets, offering homes “best in its class” for \$6,500.
- In 1910, building operations moved to a “beautiful new section of the city,” Wayne Junction, including Wingohocking Street, 15th and 16th streets, and Blavis Streets. The development featured “Large Lots” and porches for \$3,800.
- In 1911, Holmes moved further uptown and began an operation of thirty-four homes on Judson Street and a smaller development of more upscale homes - “3-story individual mansion style” - at Musgrave and Locust Avenues in Germantown. Later described in advertising as “Wonderously Beautiful.”
- In early 1912, operations began on twenty-one homes on Twenty-fourth Street south of Cambria including a store.
- In late 1912, permits were granted for an operation of only eight homes at the corner of Wyoming and “A” Streets, described as “Wonderously Beautiful Semi-Suburban homes.”
- In March of 1913, Holmes purchased the Rossmassler estate in Germantown for subdivision.
- The new year, 1914 saw the purchase of land on Twenty-sixth Street at Clearfield for 28 homes.
- In October of 1914, Holmes purchased the estate of recently deceased physician, Dr. William H. Randle at Penn and Chew Streets (now a parking lot). Ironically the stone mansion and carriage house survive today although Joshua’s homes were leveled for a shopping mall on the newly expanded LaSalle University west campus. For \$4,200 the homes featured “original and beautiful cottage effect features with Broken Skyline,” signaling the increasingly upscale appeal of his developments.

In 1916, Holmes moved to the developing area of Logan with sixty homes on 11th and 12th Streets above the Boulevard and Hunting Park. The senior Holmes afforded his son, Joshua Jr.,



The new type of Holmes ad, *The Inquirer*, November 12, 1916.

that which he himself was not given: a formal education. Joshua Jr. graduated in June of 1916 from Penn Charter School and was featured as one of the speakers at the commencement exercises. Coincidentally or not, Joshua's staid advertising took a significant creative turn that summer and fall before Joshua Jr. left for Amherst College, class of '20. Advertising for the current Logan development became more artistic and nuanced, suggesting perhaps that Joshua Jr. took interest in the advertising function and contributed his expertise to the design of the ads.

As the World War broke out, Joshua Jr. enlisted at age 18 and served in a tank battalion for seven months in Europe. It is not clear if or how he continued his college studies

after the war although he is listed in alumni directories as a member of the class of 1920. Joshua Jr. travelled to Evanston Illinois in November of 1921 to marry Miss Elizabeth Powers of that city. The senior Holmes embarked on no new projects, perhaps due to wartime manpower shortages, but continued to actively promote his existing projects.

If the listing of projects seems exhausting, perhaps it was tiring to Joshua as well as in 1921 and 1922, he sold two large tracts in Olney to other builders. It appears he was a dedicated working man as his ads for each project indicated he could personally be contacted "on site" at each of his projects as he had no office. This suggests that he was a hands-on developer who probably himself did carpentry on his various construction projects. In addition, the surviving record does not indicate that he participated in any social activities during his working years. At age 60, perhaps he was also experiencing symptoms of the heart disease that would eventually kill him.

However, in 1922, he was back in the business with the purchase of thirty-five acres of former farmland in northeast Philadelphia at Cottman and Castor Avenues as rapid development began in that area. In 1923, he added to his northeast holdings just north of Cottman with the purchase of fifty-seven acres at Castor and Rhawn. Perhaps his perspective was refreshed, if not his physical vitality, by the addition of his son to his construction business as his attention turned to the less physically demanding business of banking.



Joshua M. Holmes Sr. *The Inquirer*, July 30, 1926

In late 1922, he was a co-founder of a new bank in the rapidly developing northern reaches of the city, the Oak Lane Trust Company. Joshua served as the first president. In 1923, the company constructed a new headquarters building on Broad Street at Sixty-seventh Avenue where the Old York Road peels off from the new city grid to the previously remote country-side now poised for suburban development. The wedge shaped structure on the triangular plot seems to serve as the entry gate to the green Cheltenham Hills beyond. The stately building survives today as a medical clinic and towers above an otherwise undistinguished urban landscape.

The Oak Lane Trust Company received an important boost in fortune in 1924 when it was selected by the City of Philadelphia as “the depository of the City’s money.” Joshua junior was brought into the company as Treasurer in the following year. However, the bank did not last long as it was part of a merger by Broad Street Bank in 1928 that also brought into its dominion two other north Philadelphia banks. Joshua senior became a director of the Broad Street Bank at that time.



Oak Lane Trust building, circa 1930. *The Free Library of Philadelphia*

In June of 1925, further changes in Joshua’s life were evident as he sold his house on Valley Road (“surrounded by many forest trees and ornamental shrubbery and two acres of lawn”). It is not clear where he lived immediately thereafter, but Joshua senior, wife Sallie, son Joshua and his wife Elizabeth embarked on a Mediterranean cruise in January of 1926, indicating that the building business either was in a lull or in other hands.

Upon their return, Joshua sold additional property in the Northeast sector of the city, a 65-acre tract he owned on Bustleton Avenue, to another developer. But this may have represented a change of focus from the crowded confines of the city that all of his developments represented, because in July of 1926 he purchased the remnants of the Fisher Farm in Abington Township. Joseph Fisher was Alverthorpe’s original 19th century proprietor. The tract that Holmes purchased was across Jenkintown Road from the Alverthorpe site and extended all the way to Township Line Road, bordered on the east and west by Forest Avenue and Meetinghouse Road respectively.



Holmecrest ad, *The Inquirer*, February 14, 1937

Holmes started subdividing the property into relatively large lots, reflecting the upscale community he intended to create, put in roads, and eponymously named his creation Holmecrest. By 1930, Joshua Jr. lived with his wife and two children in the new development at #4 Holmecrest Avenue (the houses have since been renumbered) and Joshua Sr. had moved into a smaller home at 8141 High School Road in Elkins Park. The new houses in Holmecrest were clad in stone and included the latest necessity for upscale suburban living, an attached garage.

Young Joshua certainly participated in his father’s endeavors but clearly did not share the same work ethic of total dedication to the business. He became involved in alumni affairs of Amherst and emerged as a local and national figure in the games of bridge and whist, competing with the American Bridge League and the Philadelphia Whist Association. He organized bridge tournaments at his “home court,” The Old York Road Country Club, just a short walk away from his home.

On September 9, 1933, Joshua Sr. succumbed to his heart problems and died of a heart attack at his Elkins Park home.

A reception was held at his home after which he was interred at Trinity Oxford Episcopal Church. Young Joshua took over the Holmecrest development and added an attractive new feature to the construction: air conditioning, however, progress on construction and sales

seemed to lag the pace set by the senior Holmes through the years, stretching more than a decade into 1940. Joshua continued to play bridge and whist.

Joshua continued his social and trade activities and was elected to the policy committee of the Home Builders Association of Philadelphia. In May of 1938, he acquired a 60-acre tract along Willow Grove Avenue in western Cheltenham Township that was owned by the estate of Charles Custis Harrison. The new development was named Custis Woods to honor Harrison's history and a model house was opened on Willow Grove Avenue at Church Road in August of 1939. The construction continued into the fall along Willow Grove Avenue with Joshua being initially credited in advertising as the developer of the project. However, by the end of the month, the advertising listed a new builder as being "in charge of the operation." Custis Road, "winding along the crest of the hill and through the woods," was added by the end of the year to expand construction. Waln Road and Bridle Road ("with a commanding view of the Whitemarsh Valley") opened between 1941 and 1945.



Joshua Holmes, Jr., Philadelphia pairs Whist champion. *The Inquirer*,

About September of 1939, Joshua, perhaps losing interest in the trade or realizing his limitations, recruited two other developers to do the work. One was Harold L. Wilson, a young builder with only small developments in West Philadelphia and Delaware County to his credit. The other was Gettler and Helwig who had some experience in the city and the year before began construction of 100 homes on a tract along Brook Road in

**CUSTIS WOODS**

A new red brick Georgian home at \$8500 is nearing completion at Custis Woods. Drive out and see this outstanding wooded development of Joshua M. Holmes, Jr. Old shade with individually designed homes all with modern gas equipment and air-conditioned heat.

**\$7750 up**

The home pictured is furnished as a sample house and open for inspection daily from 1:30 to 5 P. M. Advance sales of homes all range under \$12,000, and lovely wooded plots are available on Willow Grove Avenue.

Drive east from Mt. Airy on Willow Grove Ave. or drive north from Elkins Park on Church St. (Route 73) to CUSTIS WOODS. There, high on the ridge overlooking the beautiful Whitemarsh Valley, you will find the ideal location for your new home.

1530 Chestnut St.      WALTER P. OFF, Agent      Ph. RIT. 8338

First ad for Custis Woods. Note Holmes is listed as developer. *The Inquirer*, September 17, 1939.

Cheltenham and Springfield. Conrad J. Gettler and Leonard Helwig seem like a matched pair for business: Gettler, born in 1901, was an immigrant from Hungary and Leonard Helwig, also born in 1901, was an immigrant from Germany. They were residents of Glenside and Jenkintown. The parties formalized their collaboration in the summer of 1940 as Gethel-Holmes Inc. with offices on Park Avenue in Elkins Park. Other projects underway nearby with different developers by the end of 1939 included Twickenham Village, Baederwood, Sunnybrook in Oreland, and Glenside Heights. In 1941, Gethel added a new road to expand construction, eventually named Bridle Road, and then, later, Waln Road.

Reflecting Holmes declining interest in the business, responsibility for the Holmecrest development was taken over by Gethel-Holmes in the fall of 1940. In March of 1941, the tract along the south side of Willow Grove Avenue was purchased and developed by another builder, adding to the perceived size of the Custis Woods development.

In March of 1942, Conrad Gettler and Leonard Helwig announced the dissolution of their partnership which also brought an end to Gethel-Holmes. It is not known if the separation was friendly, but Holmes by this time had exited the business and Helwig joined his brother Augustus to form "Helwig Bros." which continued projects in the area. In 1955, they constructed a futuristic home in their Wetherill development including a microwave and a Florida room on Willow Grove Avenue in Laverock for the TV show "The House That Home Built."

Conrad Gettler, therefore, took over the projects previous supervised by Holmes and by Gethel, trading as "Conrad J. Gettler, Inc." Gettler went on to a major development of 500 homes around Paper Mill Road in Oreland in 1946 and a development, possibly his last, of 93 homes in Horsham in 1959.

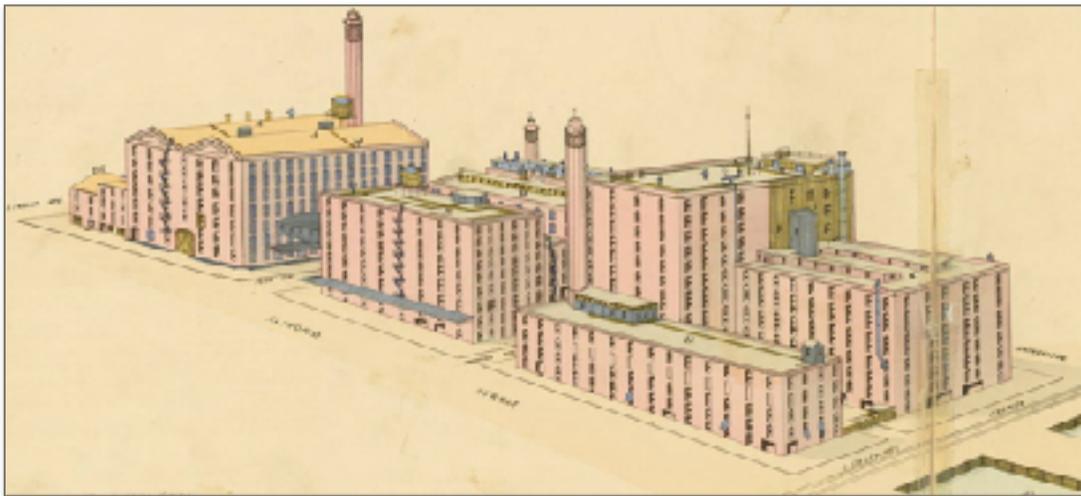
On April 8, 1948, Joshua's mother, Sallie Ackley Holmes, who had been living with Joshua Jr. on Holmecrest Road since her husband's death, passed away at home. She was eighty-eight years old. As the builder retired, Joshua and Elizabeth purchased a home in the resort community of Buck Hill Falls in the Poconos as well as a winter home in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. It was at Buck Hill Falls that Joshua died of a heart attack on August 18, 1968. Elizabeth died in Florida in 1973.

It is not known definitively who named the development or the streets as township records for that period have been lost. Most streets in Cheltenham Township have been customarily named for historic locations or residents, though it is hard to understand why such a relatively obscure designation was chosen for these roads. It seems likely, however, that the name of the development was bestowed by Joshua M. Holmes, Jr. as he was the owner of record at the time the named development was announced. He was well-educated and likely aware of the history of the tract. The roads were perhaps named by Conrad J. Gettler who was in charge of the development at the time the road names were announced. Custis Road presumably was named in order to preserve "the brand" of the tract. The mundane appellation of Bridle Road seems inexplicable except to note that Gettler used the name in his Fox Chase development a couple of years before. Perhaps he liked the rustic imagery of riding a horse through a country setting. The motivation for Waln Road is a bit obtuse although it does honor an historical Cheltenham family name.

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In Colonial days, Philadelphia was the sugar refining capital of the United States. Philadelphia's prowess as a seaport gave it access to the sugar produced in tropical areas of the Americas and as a manufacturing center, necessary refining facilities were easily constructed. Philadelphia boasted fifteen sugar refineries during the Gilded Age. One of the first major producers whose memory lingers on was the Girard Sugar Company at 5th and Girard, founded by a Bavarian immigrant, John Hillgert in 1864. After a move by his son a couple of blocks south to the waterfront at Shackamaxon Street, in 1881, the business was renamed the Pennsylvania Sugar Refinery Company, and in the 20th century, it became known as Jack Frost. The site today is the aptly named SugarHouse Casino.

The sprawling Franklin Sugar Refinery at Front and Kenilworth on the Delaware covered three city blocks. It was cleared for the construction of the I-95 highway in the 1970s. Constructed in 1866 by George Lieb Harrison, trading as Harrison, Newhall & Walsh, a reorganization due to death of partners resulted in the Harrison, Havemeyer & Company, and then Harrison, Frazier & Company. In 1885, it was renamed the Franklin Sugar Company upon the death of George. In 1887, The Sugar Refineries Company was formed with the purpose of creating an east coast monopoly trust (such instruments not yet outlawed) to control the cost of tariffs and competition. The trust incorporated in 1891 as the American Sugar Refinery Company and in 1892 purchased the four still-independent major refineries in Philadelphia which produced about a third of America's sugar production. Franklin Sugar Refinery was one of the four for which American Sugar paid \$10,000,000. As the three George L. Harrison sons and Frazier were the only stockholders of Franklin Sugar, the revenue accrued to the four families. Charles C. Harrison was president of the firm at the time; Alfred and William were in charge of manufacturing, and W. W. Frazier was the company secretary. As a result of the purchase, American Sugar controlled about 90% of the production of white sugar in the United States.



The Franklin Sugar Refinery. *The Hexamer Survey*, 1886.

The namesake of the Harrison & Frazier Sugar Company was George Lieb Harrison. Harrison was born in Philadelphia October 28, 1811, and married Sarah Ann Custis Waples in June of 1841. He studied at Harvard and was admitted to the bar in Philadelphia in 1833 but never practiced, instead investing in the burgeoning sugar refinery business in the city. His wife introduced the Custis name into the family as her grandmother, Anne Custis, was a member of the Virginia family headed by Daniel Parke Custis, first husband of President George Washington's wife Martha. Sarah died after the birth of her third son, William Welsh, at the age of 34, after which George married twice again.

Harrison took into partnership William West Frazier after his marriage to George's daughter, Harriett. W. W. Frazier is a familiar name in the history of Cheltenham. His interests extended to real estate along the Old York Road corridor, including the development of Willow Grove. He was instrumental in financing the construction of All Hallows Church in Wyncote and a partner in the development of the popular Beechwood Inn resort overlooking the Jenkintown Train Station.

William and Harriet's son, George Harrison Frazier, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1887 and went to work for the Sugar Company. He left in 1897, however, to pursue a career in banking with Brown Brothers & Company, obtaining numerous influential directorships, and retiring as managing partner. Also in 1897, George and his father were part of a group of influential residents who founded the Huntingdon Valley Country Club straddling Susquehanna Road in Rydal. He had earlier purchased land for an estate spanning Washington Lane and Meetinghouse Road in Abington Township just above Fox Chase Road. Frazier eventually became the president of Franklin and after the purchase by American, was a director and vice-president of that company. Frazier was involved in an unfortunate auto accident at the intersection of Washington Lane and Ogontz Avenue on January 9, 1934, and died from head injuries he sustained.

George Lieb Harrison's sons were Charles Custis, William Welsh, Alfred Craven, and Mitchell (by his third wife).

William Welsh Harrison graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1869 and immediately joined his father's sugar firm. He spent his entire career at the sugar company in charge of the manufacturing process. He joined the Gilded Age movement to Cheltenham Hills in 1881, purchasing the Audenreid farm, "Rosedale Hall," at the corner of Church Road and Limekiln Pike. Harrison increased the size of his estate to 138 acres, partially by eliminating the small village along Limekiln Pike that included a school and a church. In 1886, he married Bertha (Bessie) Marie Whyte in Philadelphia. Harrison retired in 1892 after the sale to American Sugar. In 1893, the mansion burned to the ground and Harrison hired Horace Trumbauer to rebuild, resulting in a grandiose mansion based on Alnwick Castle in England that he named Grey Towers. The project cost over seven million dollars in today's value and the family lived in the gatehouse during the five years of construction. His death in 1927 at his "castle" was attended by controversy as his will generously provided for an Atlantic City woman, Isabella Fishblatt. Isabella was rumored to be Harrison's mistress and local lore indicates he constructed the stone house at the top of the hill on Glenside Avenue in Wyncote for their extracurricular use. Harrison had two children: Geraldine born in 1879 and William Jr. born in 1881. The discrepancy between their birthdates and William and Bessie's marriage date doesn't seem to have been explained except that it can be noted that the children listed Bessie as their mother on various official documents, and that designation is included on their death certificates.



William Welsh Harrison

Charles Custis Harrison graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a masters degree in 1865 and proceeded to work at his father's sugar company. He became president upon his father's death in 1885. He married Ellen Nixon Waln of Philadelphia in February of 1870, thus introducing the Waln name into the family. Ellen Nixon Waln was the daughter of Edward and Ellen Cora Nixon who resided at their country estate, "Williamstowe," in the eastern part of Cheltenham Township. Charles was invited to the board of the University of Pennsylvania in 1876 and after the American Sugar sale, was persuaded to take on the role of Provost of the

University in 1894. Considerable accomplishments were accorded to him in that role until he withdrew in 1910. He purchased land in Cheltenham, the tract on the north side of Willow Grove Avenue which Holmes purchased, at the same time as his brother William purchased Rosedale Hall, perhaps intending to establish a country estate there or simply investing in the hottest property of the day. For reasons unknown, he did not construct his country home there, but did construct in 1890 in Devon which he named "Happy Creek Farm." Perhaps it was a matter of prestige as Chestnut Hill and the Main Line, thanks to the marketing prowess of the Pennsylvania Railroad, was beginning to supersede Cheltenham Hills as the preferred location for the country homes of the wealthy. Nonetheless, Harrison held on to his Cheltenham property until his death in 1929 when, his wife Letitia having preceded him in death, it passed to his estate, the "Custis Trust," for liquidation.



Charles C. Harrison

The narrative is now back to the beginning when developer Joshua M. Holmes, Jr. purchased the property from the Custis Trust for the construction of a new residential community.

SUBURBAN      SUBURBAN

## CUSTIS WOODS

### CUSTIS ROAD

Just more than one month ago, Joshua M. Holmes, Jr., Developer, announced the opening of the Custis Woods Tract at Willow Grove Avenue near Church Road at the edge of the beautiful Whitemark Valley. The sale of properties has been such that most of the available plots on Willow Grove Avenue have been selected by purchasers.

Today comes the word that CUSTIS ROAD will be built this year. Winding along the crest of the hill and through the woods, this road will make one of the most attractive locations for suburban moderate-priced homes near Philadelphia. With the building firm of Gaffler and Halbig in charge of operation, individually designed homes are offered for sale or to order.

**\$7950 up**

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Our furnished sample house is open daily from 1.30 to 9 P. M. and locations are available now on Willow Grove Avenue, Twickenham Road and Custis Road. Drive East from Mt. Airy on Willow Grove Avenue, or West</p> | <p>from Ellipse Park on Church Road (Route 21) to Custis Woods. There, overlooking the lovely valley, you will find a home site to fulfill your highest aspirations.</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

1530 Chestnut St.      WALTER F. OFF, Agent      N. BILB

JENKINTOWN      JENKINTOWN

Custis Woods ad. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 24, 1939.