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Over the Moon About the Water

NET CONNECTION A young resident of Old Hill, poised for the catch at Nash's Pond, one of the many small bodies of water that define the area's character.

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IF the dates on the small signs affixed to facades are to be believed, Old Hill, a well-to-do enclave of Westport, is as unequivocally aged as its name indicates.

Consider the chocolate-brown 1766 Colonial on Kings Highway North, among similar early-American confections, or the 1823 Federal that distinguishes Partrick Road. Even a Cape on Old Hill Road has a patina of history, its walls draped in ivy.

The “hill” part, too, seems to be borne out. In Fairfield County about 50 miles from Midtown Manhattan, Old Hill is indeed on a gentle slope, which allows prized homes to enjoy glimpses of a valley through rows of sturdy oaks.

But the landscape feature that most obviously asserts itself, especially in the revealing winter months, is water: ponds like Nash's and Cypress, whose glimmering edges lap the edges of yards, and other pools too small to be named, which collect behind logs until they finally find ways around.

With these up-close reminders of the natural world, residents' passion for protecting local aquifers isn't surprising. Many who vehemently opposed development efforts won a significant battle in 2007 against a company called ARS Partners, forcing it to renounce its claim to almost half of a 56-acre site punctuated with wetlands along the Newtown Turnpike.

Today only 3 of 13 homes planned for the remaining subdivision are built, and one is unsold, said Ralph Grasso, the owner of ARS. Opponents “could have bought the parcel when it was available, but they never thought to do that,” he said. “But it was one of the last big parcels in Westport.”

Preservation fights can be notably fierce. But at this point residents are savoring their victory, said one of them, Jerry Doyle, who extolled the beauty of the area's bodies of water, and pointed out that they still brimmed with wildlife like beavers, snapping turtles and fish. “People in Westport can be outspoken,” said Mr. Doyle, who runs a communications company in Manhattan, “but one of the reasons we love it is that everybody is so involved.”

He was also drawn to the area by the golf course at Westport's Longshore Club Park. Until recently, only residents could play there — one reason that Mr. Doyle moved here from Norwalk in 2004, even though the distance between his former and current addresses amounts to only half a mile.

He and his family live in a five-bedroom colonial, with three and a half baths and 4,200 square feet. They paid \$875,000, and spent an additional \$100,000 on renovations, including new siding. He also added a sunroom and front porch, he said, though “I didn't remove a single tree.”

WHAT YOU'LL FIND

Old Hill's exact borders can be a subject of disagreement. Under a generous definition, it stretches from Post Road West to Wilton Road, from Norwalk to the Saugatuck River, which means it has about 3,500 people across two and a half square miles, according to census figures.

Architecturally, the dominant styles are Colonial, with low saltbox-style rooflines and 12-over-12 windows, and colonial, with garages that indicate 20th-century origins. Many of the newer properties are found on dead-end private streets, some unpaved, in a town where such roads outnumber public ones, 460 to 332, according to town officials.

But scattered throughout are bulging newer mansions with circular windows, enclosed wraparound porches and deep porticos, their roofs topped by whimsical glass-walled belvederes.

In the last few years, some Old Hill residents have tried to halt construction of these homes-on-steroids by making it tougher to tear down what previously stood on their lots. In 2008, the town strengthened an ordinance to make the razing of any building at least 50 years old subject to an automatic six-month delay and to public review.

That makes it one of the strictest such measures in Fairfield County — though the recession may have obviated some concerns of teardown foes.

In 2009, Westport's building department issued 55 residential demolition permits, down from 94 in 2007, at the height of the housing boom. Similarly, nearby Greenwich issued 54 demolition permits in 2009 versus 164 in 2007, and New Canaan gave out 31 versus 56.

But one person's McMansion may be another's paradise. In any case, along Old Hill Road, for one, the setbacks are ample enough that new houses are framed in proportion to their size, said Andy Frank, a resident. "There's mature landscaping here, so you have nice buffers between neighbors," Mr. Frank added, asserting that criticism of oversized homes should be redirected.

But Mr. Frank's views may not be completely representative, as his company, Andy Frank Builders, has put up four large homes in Old Hill over the last decade — including his own, a five-bedroom colonial. "I would like to build two-bedroom Capes," he said, "but I can only build what the market dictates."

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

Although few would call Old Hill affordable, homes tend to sell for slightly less than in Westport as a whole. It is rare for a property to trade for less than \$750,000, and those that do are usually 1950s ranches on half-acre lots.

Last year 22 homes sold, for an average \$1.1 million, versus \$1.4 million for Westport, based on data from the Greater Fairfield County Consolidated Multiple Listing Service. Estates like those along Broadview Road are at the high end, with their guest houses and sweeping lawns. They can command more than \$2 million.

In recent years, as fewer homes changed hands and prices generally dropped, Old Hill's would-be sellers, frustrated by the market, decided to rent out instead. A crucial factor in the resulting increase in rentals, brokers say, was buyers who played along. Convinced that prices would fall further, many decided to take a breather from their searches and become renters.

In 2009, 203 homes were rented in Westport, including many in Old Hill — up from 170 in 2007, said Marilyn Heffers, a broker with William Raveis. Of the current crop of 11 on the market in Old

Hill, the average rent is \$2,800 a month. But there are fewer rentals this year, which suggests that “buyers are feeling more comfortable,” Ms. Heffers said. “They waited it out and saw adjustments take place.”

WHAT TO DO

Earthplace, a 62-acre park at Old Hill’s heart, has a museum-and-preschool complex that hummed with the sounds of birthday parties on a recent afternoon. On the grounds, a couple used snowshoes to traverse some of the three miles of trails. (The park also has trails of compacted stone, to accommodate wheelchairs.)

Working farms are rare, but there are converted barns like the Red Barn, which serves a surf-and-turf-type menu in dining rooms hung with wagon-wheel lights and an oxen yoke. Opened in 1932, it is a Westport fixture.

THE SCHOOLS

Even more than in comparable areas, residents cite Old Hill’s public schools as a chief reason they moved in.

King’s Highway Elementary School has 470 in kindergarten through fifth grade. Last year, 79 percent of fourth graders met standards in reading, 85 percent in math and 82 percent in writing.

Coleytown Middle School enrolls 500 students in sixth through eighth grade. Last year, 97 percent of eighth graders met goals in reading, 97 percent in math and 99 percent in writing.

At Staples High School, with 1,800 enrollees, SAT averages last year were 596 in reading, 608 in math and in 605 writing, versus 503, 508 and 506 statewide.

Another option is the [Connecticut Friends School](#) in Wilton, which plans to convert a 16-acre piece of a former Norwalk estate on the Old Hill border as a second campus. The school offers kindergarten through eighth grade to 60 students for about \$19,000 a year.

THE COMMUTE

The closest stop on the New Haven Metro-North Railroad line is Westport. Each weekday morning, eight trains depart between 6 and 8; the average trip to Grand Central Terminal is 68 minutes. A monthly pass costs \$308 at the station, and \$301.84 online.

Parking is a challenge. Of the station’s 1,307 spaces, 1,030 require a permit, and the waiting list is at least four years, according to Westport’s police department. But commuters can vie for day-use spaces, which cost \$4.

THE HISTORY

During the Revolution, the British torched Danbury, then tried to march toward the Westport shore, where their ships awaited. But they were forced to detour along the path of Red Coat Road, after noticing Gen. Benedict Arnold and his forces near where Partrick Road runs today, according to Allen Raymond, the town historian.

Despite an impassioned speech at the triangular park on Kings Highway, Arnold couldn’t rally his troops to give chase, and the British escaped.