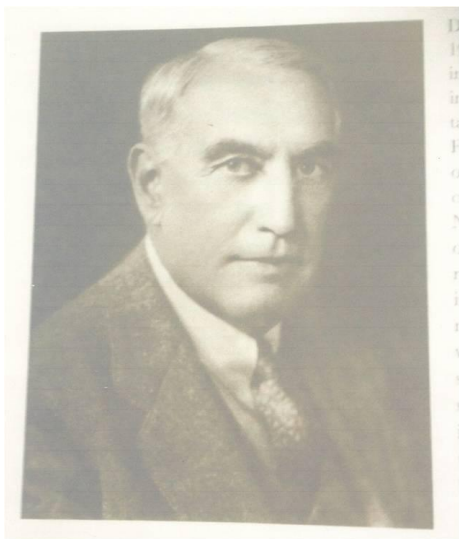


The Mystery of Mirrielees and My 17 Year-long Attempt at its Demystification

By Ilse E. Kagan, Historian of the Village of Great Neck Estates

My topic is the mystery of a how someone, other than the McKnight brothers, who were the dominant developers in the Great Neck area in the early 1900's, managed to own and develop land in Great Neck Estates under the British name of the Mirrielees Corporation. How did Mirrielees Park with such English-named streets as Mirrielees, Ascot and Gloucester on the west side of Bayview Avenue come to be?



When I was appointed village historian in 1994, I was given the belief that Great Neck Estates was solely the creation of the McKnight brothers who had incorporated the area in 1911 with about 10 families living there at the time. The five McKnight brothers had come north from West Virginia to invest in real estate in New York and shamelessly to become rich in the process. The eldest, Harvey Stewart McKnight was a lawyer. The other four were described as stenographers. They settled in Queens

and began to invest in real estate there, especially in Bayside's waterfront property, where they were extremely successful. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle remarked that "the brothers could easily be the next Vanderbilts of America".

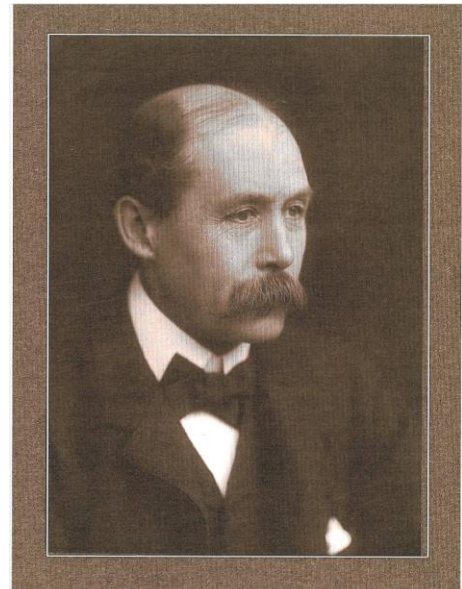
In 1909, when transportation to New York City's Penn station was only a year away, the

brothers bought the large farm of Richard Thorne of Great Neck whose family had owned the land for 300 years. They added a smaller farm of the Duryea family and purchased water front property as well. They ended up with “the largest Long Island development of its time” and their first land purchase east of New York City. They were innovative developers, very conscious of the natural beauty of the landscape and they planned it as a garden-like community for high class New York City dwellers who wanted trees and flowers and recreational facilities like golf, swimming, tennis, horses and car racing, more than just a country home. All this being available within easy reach of Manhattan.

Ira McKnight was in charge of the development. He sent out prospecti for the area, in which he praised the property for its natural beauty of hills, valleys, water views and winding drives. To maximize these assets he laid out a plan for the land with the help of a famous landscape architect, Robert Anderson Pope, a student of Frederick Law Olmsted who introduced a curvilinear design for its streets to give as much privacy as possible for every home that would be built. It was a plan that would confuse every visitor to the Estates ever after. By 1912, the Great Neck Estates’ golf course was completed west of Bayview Avenue reaching from the farthest northern corner but not to the farthest southern corner which would have been Cutter Mill Road. Why did the McKnight brothers stop there?

As is well known, most streets in the Estates are named after trees, elm, maple, locust, cedar, oak, pine, ash, sycamore etc., and that is why the Mirrielees addition with its British names sounds so out of place and requires explanation. With that little knowledge, I, one day, found myself in the library, when Risha Rosner was the reference librarian. She showed me a clipping from a newsletter entitled “Real Estate Opportunities”. It had no date and no name of an author or publisher. She had tried, without success, to trace it, but suggested that it might have been published circa 1924. Let me quote the first paragraph. It is important because that started this whole search;

“Mirrieles Park is the property of the estate of Sir Frederick Mirrieles late of Surrey, England and consists of heavily wooded land adjoining the Soundview golf course at Cutter Mill and Bayview Avenue, Great Neck. Major Donald Mirrieles the executor of Sir Frederick’s estate is an Oxford graduate and out of feeling of fellowship for undergraduate students of American colleges in need of summer employment, planned the development of the property by college students.”



Hence Amherst road in honor of the Amherst students who were responsible for clearing the land. The information was informative. But how Sir Frederick got to own that property still remained a puzzle. Some people even suggested that it was land bequeathed to the family by Lord Sterling in the 17th century when the British ruled this part of the island. Rubbish, of course, but who knew better? Our clues were:

- 1) The title of Major Donald Mirrieles told us that he had fought in world WW1.
- 2) It spoke of the estate of Sir Frederick so we knew that his father had passed away.
- 3) It tells us that he was an Oxford graduate.
- 4) It happened after the Great Neck golf course was renamed the Soundview golf course which happened in 1920 when it became a favorite of all the celebrities living in Great Neck at the time as well as of the wealthy of New York City who were now able to travel to and from Manhattan in 25 minutes via the LIRR.





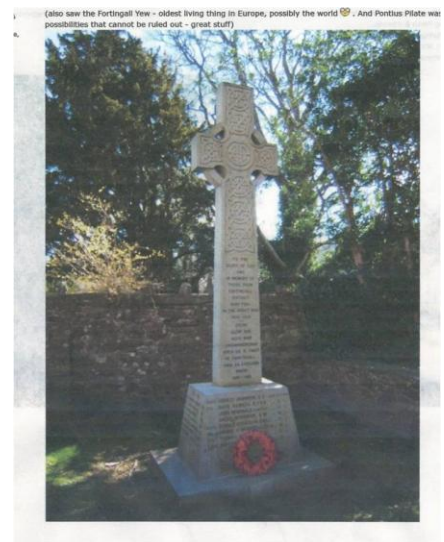
My first move in my search was an easy one -- to contact my friends at Oxford asking them to find any information on this graduate in the hope that he or his family was still approachable. They first had to find out which of the 39 colleges he had attended. My friends came back with good news and very bad news. Yes, they found his name Frederick Donald Mirrieles (he went by his middle name). He was a member of Balliol College but he had blown himself up while demonstrating the use of a hand grenade in World War II on August 8th, 1940 at the age of 58.

He had been in the army as a volunteer too old to be called up. The entry in the Balliol college register showed that he was born on September 4th, 1881, graduated from Oxford in 1904, married in September 1910 a Mary Cavendish Pangbourne of Baltimore. ^



These dates caused some problems. He was not as young as I had thought. He was obviously not in Great Neck from 1914 to 1919, during the war years, because he fought on the European front as well as in Egypt, Salónica and that he participated in the Caucasus campaign. He was one of the few who managed to stay alive, if you have ever read Vera Brittain's book, only to die so tragically 20 years later.

Just before coming here I took a second look at the page sent to me by the Scottish military research group and I was shocked to read that a Major Donald Currie Mirrieles, whom they identify as the child of our Great Neck Estates Major Frederic Donald



Mirrielees also died in World War II at the age of 29 on August 29th, 1944. He had attended Trinity College, Cambridge.

The marriage of our Major Mirrielees was well publicized. It took place in Baltimore the home of

MISS PANGBOURNE TO WED.
Baltimore Girl Engaged to Donald Merrieles, Son of Sir Frederick.

Special to The New York Times.
BALTIMORE, Aug. 10.—The engagement is announced of Miss Mary Cavendish Pangbourne, daughter of Major and Mrs. J. G. Pangbourne of this city, to Donald Merrieles, only son of Sir Frederick and Lady Merrielees of Surrey, England. The news of the betrothal was cabled to-day from England, where Miss Pangbourne, who went abroad with a party of friends several months ago, is now visiting. The wedding will take place in this country in the Autumn.

Miss Pangbourne attracted admiration during the St. Louis Exposition, where she accompanied her father. Major Pangbourne, who was in charge of the exhibit of the Baltimore & Ohio Railway of which he is general publicity agent and Chief Engineer. Miss Pangbourne was also the companion of her father during his trip around the world undertaken as President of the Railway Commission appointed by the late Marshall Field of Chicago to collect specimens of motive power in different countries for the railway museum established by Mr. Field in his native city. During a portion of this journey Major Pangbourne and his wife and daughter traveled in a private car provided by the Czar of Russia.

The New York Times
Published: August 11, 1910

his bride, in 1910, before there was any connection to Great Neck Estates. The New York Times of August 11, 1910 published an announcement of his engagement which is interesting. It tells how he met his bride while she was on a world tour with her father who was a well-known railway tycoon. He was the general publicity agent and chief engineer of the Baltimore & Ohio Railway and handled all the booths at international exhibits. The engagement announcement interestingly mentions that the Pangbournes traveled in a car provided by the Czar.

This special treatment by the Czar ties back to the Mirrielees. The family was, I also discovered, famous for its department store in Moscow. Known as Muir and Mirrielees, it was situated right next to the Bolshoi theatre, and was as popular a name as Macy's of New York. Apparently, the Czar was their mutual friend. Sir Frederick had worked in Moscow for many years for the family business.

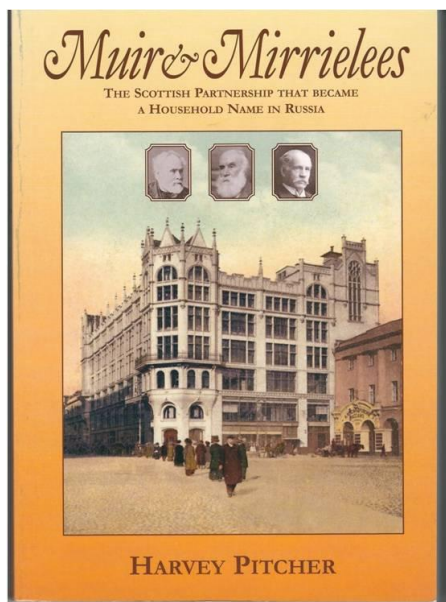


To get back to my search. Not ever being able to contact Major Donald Mirrielees, I tried to find an offspring or anyone who might be able to connect the family to Great Neck Estates.

The Balliol register gave an address for him in Surrey, England where I found that Sir Frederick in 1888 had a significant mansion known by the

name of “Goddard’s” built by the famous contemporary architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. I found the town and telephoned hoping that the house was still occupied by the family. No such luck. I also saw an address for the Major in London, so I had the London telephone company send me pages from the telephone directory. There was no one listed under the Mirrielees name, not that I expected any. I had previously contacted Perth in Scotland where the family originated. Also with no success.

The Mirrielees were a big Scottish clan and many members had left Scotland and moved elsewhere, including the United States. The next move was to get in touch with the various Mirrielees family groups which had formed all over America asking if they knew the name of the Major.



That, too, proved unsuccessful except that someone mentioned a book that had been written in 1994 about the Muir and Mirrielees connection and their success story in Russia. I got in touch with the author, a gentleman named Harvey Pitcher who knew the family well. However, he focused in his book on the department store in Moscow and on the brothers who worked there. He knew of Sir Frederick (the owner of the Great Neck Estates property) but he had left his family business in 1879 and settled in London where he married the eldest daughter of Sir Donald Currie owner of the Union Castle Shipping Line. Sir Donald persuaded him to

join his firm. When he died in 1909, Sir Frederick took over the running of the shipping line. Shortly thereafter, the Union Castle Line, whose ships sailed from England to South Africa , mostly carrying mail had a disagreement with the South African government and Sir Frederick decided in 1911 to sell the company to a Sir Owen Philips. His wife and her brother were the heirs so that she came into a big inheritance. It is said that she received “the largest check that ever passed through a British bank.” This information for my quest was priceless moreover on my

second conversation with the author, Mr. Pitcher remembered that a daughter of Major Donald might still be living in London. Her name was Mary Cunningham. I found her telephone number and called. Introducing myself as the GNE, village historian. This meant nothing to her and on top of that, she showed absolutely no interest in discussing anything that happened in America and would make no room for seeing me on any of my first three visits to London.

On a subsequent visit, I arrived in London after an overnight flight. Very tired. I dumped my baggage at my friend's apartment in St. John's Wood in the northwest of London and instead of



taking a nap, I called Mary again. The same story. She was leaving on a trip the next day and was too busy to see me. I insisted that I could come right now. Finally she had no excuse and invited me to come for tea. I had been rejected so many times. At this time, I have to admit, I was not well prepared as I hoped.

Mary Cunningham was a very stately British lady. She lived in the southwest of London, a good distance away from my lodgings. I did manage to get there and was

greeted at the door of her apartment or rather town house, which seemed very comfortable, but not elaborate.. Mary was born in 1920, as we had established, the youngest of Major Mirrielees's children. I was not the historian until 1994, and this was my third or fourth attempt at seeing her. She must have been in her late seventies at the time. She showed me photos of her father but when I tried to steer the conversation to America, she was not very forthcoming. Her mother, an American from Baltimore .she said, was such an anglophile, that America was never mentioned in her house. Her children were not at all interested either and when I invited her to come to the States on the opening of a display I was going to prepare on her family, she did not seem to want to attend; her excuse was that she was too old to travel. She said that if I wanted to know anything about the Estates property, I would have to contact some Boston lawyer. I left very

pleased to have met her but dissatisfied with myself. Remember, this whole search was not a scholarly investigation. No one other than myself was particularly interested in this story. So, when Mary started talking of approaching lawyers in Boston to find my answer, I stopped there. To find a Boston lawyer who had dealings in Great Neck Estates 100 years ago seemed more than I wanted to undertake.

I felt a lot better a couple of weeks later when I was back home and a letter arrived sending me copies of her family photographs. I felt I had accomplished something. I found Major Donald's daughter, I had photographs of my three main characters, Sir Frederick, Major Donald Mirrielees and Mary Cunningham., and I had established that the Mirrielees Corporation developed the land after 1920 but probably earlier than 1924 as was suggested by Risha at the library. But still, after all the calls and visits and trips, I did not know how Sir Frederick got to Great Neck.

Now brace yourselves! Here comes the irony of the whole situation. You will not believe this. The answer lay dormant in the drawer of a Great Neck Estates resident who would not release the document that had all the answers for at least another 17 years. When Great Neck Estates celebrated its hundredth anniversary of incorporation in 2011. I gave a talk on the history of the Estates here for the Great Neck Historical Society. Two days before my speech I received a voluminous typewritten document. It was the autobiography of Stewart McKnight the lawyer, who with his brother Ira, were the principals in developing Great Neck Estates. This ended a period of 100years, from 1911 until-2011, that researchers had been groping in the dark. It turns out that Stewart told a very different story than I had imagined.

While I was thinking that the development of Great Neck Estates which was praised universally for its successful planning of a garden like community, was financially a very lucrative operation making the McKnight brothers ever more wealthy,(the future Vanderbilts) it was in fact a financial disaster for the brothers. In 1907 the stock market in America crashed. Bankruptcies burgeoned especially in New York and banks slowed down on loans and real estate mortgages. This was particularly painful

for the McKnight brothers. Because they had created subsidiary companies for every single plot they had acquired each with its own burden of mortgages for which the brothers were personally responsible. Great Neck Estates became the subsidiary company called the Villa Park Association of Great Neck. The next year 1908 saw some improvements in the stock market and optimistically they thought that everything would go back to normal. That is when they assembled the acreage for the future GNE, which was completed in 1909. All the time they were selling lots in Great Neck Estates, the brothers' financial situation got worse and worse. The banks demanded bonuses for renewing loans and then they refused them altogether. The property of Great Neck Estates was lost to foreclosure. The McKnights ran out of their private assets to put up against the loans and they lost everything.

Now here it comes!! The answer to my original question. In desperation, Stewart McKnight turned to a friend by the name of Herbert Fell in 1913 who had business connections in London. He needed funds to finance his own utility and thought that Stewart would also find people interested in investing in the United States. Herbert Fell had Sir Frederick Mirrielees and his wife in mind who had recently sold the Union Castle Line he had been running after the death of his father-in-law. His wife and her brother were the heirs who were left with a lot of money to invest as mentioned earlier. In 1913 Fell and Stewart actually set out for London, set up an office there in the financial district near the Bank of England, equipped with an elegant portfolio. The leading accounting firm of Haskins and Sells made an audit and prepared a financial statement of the books of the McKnight Realty Company and Joseph P. Day, the leading real estate broker and expert conducted an appraisal of all the McKnight properties. The McKnight net worth was over \$2million. Stewart's plan was to sell \$350,000 of McKnight Realty preferred stock bearing 6% interest. The preferred stock holders were to name two of the five directors of the company. The purchaser of the preferred stock was also to purchase mortgages as they became due.

Fell and McKnight made contact with Sir Frederick Mirrielees who apparently invited them to Goddard's for a weekend. When next he visited their office, they presented their real estate

proposition to him. He expressed quite an interest especially in the 6% interest. Stewart was offering, something not available in England nor the rest of Europe. He took home the audit, appraisal and a memorandum Stewart had prepared of the history of the McKnight Realty Company including its method of operation and the stringency of the financial market in New York. In a few days Sir Frederick called and asked to meet him at the office of his counselor, a Mr. Franklin, since he had decided to accept the proposition. The closing of that transaction seemed to solve the brothers' financial problems.

Mr. Hayath, president of the Lincoln Trust Company and Mr. Northrop, counsel of the bank, were made directors of the company representing Sir Frederick, his son, a young man in his "twenties," came over and took a position in the office. Now we finally meet our man who will later develop Mirrieles Park. Donald was much older than that as we had established earlier. Born on 4 September 1881 that would have made him a man in his 30's when he came to Great Neck. He was already a married man and even a father. But no mention is made of his family in the autobiography. The McKnight brothers were elated with the arrangements and they took that money to beautify even further their GNE property rather than pay off their other debts. Sir Frederick came over to America to see where his money lay, was very pleased with what he saw and promised if they ever needed more funds, he would be pleased to provide them. Sir Frederick returned to London. This happened in 1913.

The next year 1914, was the final blow for the McKnight Realty. Soon after Sir Frederick returned to London, he became very despondent, and according to his obituary he died that year of heart failure in a nursing home, but I was informed that his death was a suicide. His widow wanted nothing to do with the Great Neck investment, and even though one of the McKnight brothers, Maxwell, the treasurer of the company, was sent over to London, to plead with her, she was adamant. She turned the matter over to her attorneys, to "squeeze out what they could." Now Stewart was defeated: "We were worse off than before, sacrificing every asset we had to meet obligations and avoid receivership, we were closed out by mortgages, foreclosures and mortgage lenders taking collateral

on the loans they had provided.” Our Major went back home for his father’s burial, and probably without returning to Great Neck, joined the army to fight in the First World War. When he returned after the end of WWI to Great Neck he was handed the plots that he had won by suing the McKnights. The Daily Brooklyn Eagle had a note about a Bayside waterfront property that was handed to him as collateral for his bonds, and the undeveloped plot in Great Neck.

There is one aspect of the puzzle that I have as yet not addressed. Why did the Soundview golf course stop at what is now Amherst road? The land was there so why was it not used before the Mirrielees sued for it. The answer lay hidden in Stewart’s autobiography. Ira McKnight, the brother in charge of the development of Great Neck Estates in 1911, had planned to build “a 300 room hotel at a cost of \$1,000,000 to rise on 10 acres on the southwest quadrant. It was to be designed by Frank M. Andrews the architect of the McAlpine hotel in New York City”. Now that we know of the financial circumstances of the brothers the costs were obviously beyond their means. It is the same plot that Major Donald used for his Mirrielees Park.

The last question that needs an answer is who wrote the column that Risha had so carefully preserved in the Great Neck Library? Stewart McKnight in his autobiography mentions that he kept a printing press, and that he published newsletters on the real estate industry in the area and on the new way that people were clearing the land, similarly to what Major Donald Mirrielees was doing, by hiring strong young men with no prior experience from colleges. So we have to assume that the news-cutting Risha showed me was written and printed by Stewart McKnight the author of the memoir. Stewart and his family lived in abject poverty for several years, but recovered. Stewart died revered as Nassau County’s Attorney General.

I have so far found no references to Donald’s residencies during his stay in America. He was after all not a bachelor, but a married man of forty with a wife and three children. One would have to assume that the family stayed in Baltimore with their grandparents.