

Lancaster Underhill and Early Bronxville

By Ray Geselbracht

Underhill family members probably first migrated into the Bronxville area in the early to mid-18th century. By the mid-19th century, Underhill family land included a parcel that ran north from Pondfield Road just to the east of the Bronx River. A small house at the southern point of this land, fronting on Pondfield Road, was the home at this time and almost until the century's end of Lancaster O. Underhill, a member of the third or perhaps fourth generation of his family to live in the Bronxville area.

The house was very modest, as is suggested by the \$1,000 valuation given it in the 1870 census. Underhill and his wife, Elizabeth, married probably in about 1833 or 1834, when he was about twenty-five and she was eighteen or nineteen. Over the next twenty-three years they had five children—Abby, Oscar, Mary, Caroline, Emily, and Eugene.

When the railroad built north from New York City, the tracks ran along the Bronx River, which happened to take them right past Underhill's house, which became a train station, and Underhill was appointed stationmaster. This was in 1844, when Bronxville was called Underhill's Crossing. A few years later, in 1852, a post office was established in what was now called Bronxville. Since it made sense to have the new post office near the railroad tracks, room was made for it in Underhill's house, and he was made postmaster, at a salary of about \$190 a year.



Underhill described himself as a farmer to the census-taker in 1850; in the 1860 census he was a postmaster; in 1870 he was a railroad clerk; in 1880 he was a "depot agent."

One day when he had grown old, Underhill posed for a photographer outside his house. The occasion for this photo session is not known. Two photographs were made. It's hard for a modern viewer of these photographs not to feel a comic element in them. Here is apparently a highly rumpled old man, whose long, sad face droops into a full white beard, and whose dusty, shapeless shoes seem in conflict with his neat straw hat. Perhaps, one feels, this is a case of a country farmer being made to put on his uncomfortable Sunday best and make a fool of himself in front of a camera.

Underhill's friends and neighbors in Bronxville would have known better. The clothes were not his Sunday best, they were his everyday clothes. He was a good dresser, and this was how he usually, or maybe often anyway, looked, with waistcoat, a watch chain fastened in his buttonhole, and cufflinks. A proper-looking gentleman, if also, in his old age, a somewhat eccentric-looking character.

Underhill apparently enjoyed being stationmaster and postmaster. He must have been a much more social and out-going person than he appears in his photographs, one who enjoyed meeting and talking with everyone who came for their mail or to catch the train. His postmaster job allowed him to read all the postcards, and he enjoyed guessing at postage due by tossing a piece of mail and seeing how far it went. He only gave up his two jobs, probably because of failing health, in 1896, when he was 87 years old.

He sold his land in early 1898 to William Van Duzer Lawrence, who used it to further his project of expanding Bronxville from rural hamlet to suburban village — building on it during the next twenty years his first commercial building in Bronxville, the Arcade Block, which covered the bit of land on which Underhill's house once stood, and a laundry, a garage for the Hotel Gramatan, and an electric power company.

One day in May 1898, Underhill fell and injured his leg, and three days later he died — only a few hundred yards from the place where he had been born. He was buried in a family plot, joining his wife Elizabeth, in Saint Paul's churchyard cemetery in Mount Vernon. In his will, he gave his house and all its contents to his children, and it doesn't appear that he had much more than that to bequeath.



Underhill was a leading figure in old Bronxville, the rural hamlet where a small population lived primarily on a few farms and estates. His death and Bronxville's birth as a suburban village occurred at almost the same time. A few weeks before Underhill died, Bronxville was incorporated as a village. The village grew quickly, and before too many years passed it had become something quite new and different, and if the old gentleman, Lancaster Underhill, had managed somehow to get a look at this new Bronxville, he might have wondered where in heaven he was.



Gravestone in the cemetery at St. Paul's Church, Mount Vernon, for Lancaster Underhill and his wife Eliza.