

# THE HOUSE THAT JORDAN'S BUILT

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, small, affordable houses are disappearing. But in the 1930s, they were being championed. In fact, in June of 1935, a motorcar parade led by the American Legion band wound its way from Manchester Field to Stowell Road to celebrate two house projects designed to set examples for affordable homes.

Built during tough financial times, both projects were designed to demonstrate the possibilities for home building and remodeling with assistance from the new Federal Housing Authority created in 1934.

One was a local demonstration project, inspired by the "Better Homes in America" movement.

The second house was and remains unique in Winchester. It was built by the Jordan Marsh Company, designed by an architect chosen through a competition which attracted nearly 300 architects.

## BETTER HOMES IN AMERICA

Following the First World War, when there was a shortage of homes, the value of home ownership entered into public policy. The year 1922 saw a Better Homes in America movement initiated that campaigned for home ownership, modernization, and beautification. President Warren G. Harding and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover kicked off the first Better Homes Week in October 1922 for the National Better Homes Advisory Council. The advent of the Great Depression in 1929, when many banks failed and caused a marked decrease in home loans and ownership, made the housing situation more critical.

By 1932, Winchester had its own Better Homes committee, led by Lorence Woodside (first local woman candidate for the Board of Selectmen). As in many other American towns, the group organized annual Better Homes demonstration weeks or days. The first, in April 1932, featured a tour of several homes plus a handicraft exhibition at the Wyman School.

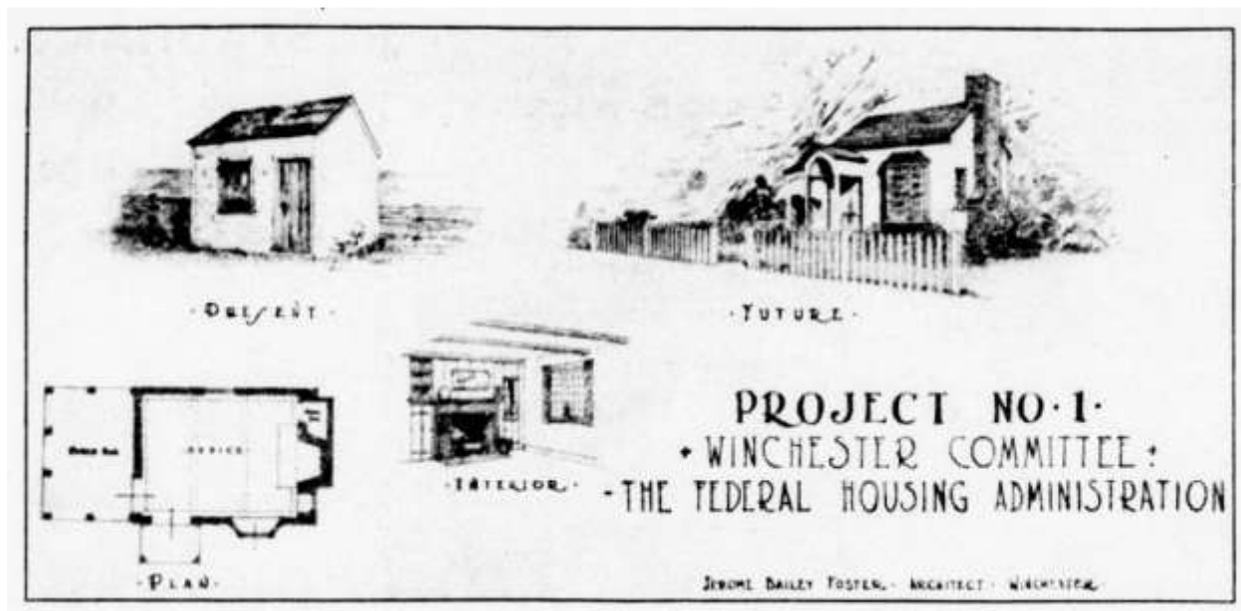
By February 1935, Winchester was allied with the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) whose purpose was to regulate the rate of interest and the terms of mortgages that it insured and thus increase the number of people who could afford a down payment and mortgage payments, thereby increasing the market for single-family homes.

The FHA appointed W. Allan Wilde as the General Chairman of the Winchester Better Housing Community Campaign. Wilde's group chose that June to show off possibilities for home improvement with a "Little House" located on Manchester Field.

## LITTLE HOUSE

In 1934, the organizers of the national Better Homes in America campaign constructed "America's Little House" in Manhattan at the intersection of 39th Street and Park Avenue alongside neighboring skyscrapers. Its purpose was to promote home ownership.

A year later Winchester took a truly little house from Blind Bridge Street (at the intersection of Skillings and Main), trucked it over to Manchester Field opposite the Post Office, and renovated it according to a design by Jerome Bailey Foster as an example of what could be done in the way of home improvement under the FHA.



With services and materials donated by local businessmen and companies, the dilapidated building was transformed into the headquarters for the local FHA campaign. It was dedicated on Better Housing Day, June 15, 1935, and opened for public view.

Then the motor parade proceeded to Stowell Road for the Jordan Marsh house groundbreaking ceremony.

## JORDAN MARSH HOUSE

That same year, the Jordan Marsh (department store) Company launched a housing development in cooperation with the FHA. To familiarize New England with advantages available through the FHA and to demonstrate the possibilities for home building and remodeling under the federal act, seven model one-family houses were built in seven different suburbs in four price ranges.

The first stage included a competition for architects to plan the seven modern homes. Before the winners were announced, ground was broken on Better Housing Day in the seven Greater Boston

suburbs chosen as the house sites – Belmont, Melrose, Milton, Newton, Wellesley, West Roxbury, and Winchester.

That morning, representatives of the Jordan Marsh Company and FHA were welcomed by civic organizations and town officials. After the dedication of the “Little House” on Manchester Field, the band of Winchester’s American Legion Post led a parade of automobiles containing local and guest officials up Thompson, Main, Mt. Vernon, and Washington streets to Stowell Road.

At the empty lot for 16 Stowell Road, Wilde took a silver spade presented to him by the Jordan Marsh Co. and broke ground. Speeches were made about the auspicious occasion. Simultaneously, ground was broken in the other six towns, and the *Boston Globe* reported that “in every case they attracted throngs of interested spectators.”

In July, the winning architects were announced. Boston architect Robert Louis Stevenson won in two categories, including the Winchester one. A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design and Beaux Art Institute of Design in New York City, Stevenson had published pattern books for modestly priced houses prior to the contest.

The Jordan Marsh house, as it was popularly known, was built and, in July 1936, the *Winchester Star* reported it sold to a current resident. The article described it as “an artistic gabled house having white clapboards and a cedar-shingled roof. It has six rooms plus a large playroom with extra fireplace in the basement. There is a tiled lavatory on the first floor and two full baths on the second floor, one being a part of the master’s chamber. This house has concealed radiation and an oil burner.”

In 1936, a year after it opened, the “Little House” was moved to the Boy Scout camp in Amesbury. The housing committees became obsolete as the country pulled itself out of the Depression (though the Better Homes Garden Club established in June 1934 as an activity of the Better Homes in America Committee outlived its parent group).

The Jordan Marsh house still stands. Since it has had an addition, it is not in its original state, but it survives as a product of a time when the town and nation promoted affordable home ownership for all.



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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 20, 2018. This revision supersedes all previous articles.