Some McKownville history, and the houses of McKownville

William McKown (1763-1843), starting in 1797, bought several hundred acres of land across which he knew the Great Western Turnpike would be constructed (later called the Great Western Plank Road, now Western Avenue, US Route 20). He built a hotel and tavern on a site that proved to be ideally situated next to the south side of the new road, about five miles west of the Hudson River shore at Albany, located at the present intersection of Fuller Road and Western Avenue. The McKown hotel was ready for the opening of the eastern section of the Turnpike in 1800, and a focal point in the 19th century of the small community which grew along this part of the Western Turnpike. William McKown was one of the prominent citizens of the Town of Guilderland, being elected Town Supervisor 1813-1824, and the Guilderland representative on the Albany County Board of Supervisors from 1818-1824.

William McKown's hotel and tavern, built c. 1796-9. The location became the south side of the Western Turnpike at the intersection with Fuller Road. This building burned down in 1917; the petition to Albany County to establish the McKownville Fire District was submitted very soon after this event.

The McKown hotel was leased in 1884 from the heirs of William McKown's eldest grandson (William J McKown, 1811-1879) by William H Witbeck, who with his family members ran the business until two months before the hotel burned down in 1917.

William H Witbeck in 1907 purchased the hotel and 184 acres from the William J McKown heirs, extending both east and west from the hotel lot and on both sides of the Western Turnpike, between the present Knowles Terrace and Church Road. He started to subdivide and sell lots from this land in 1909, but soon after sold most of it to a business partnership of his son Benjamin F Witbeck and Arthur F Pitkin. This partnership, later becoming the Pitkin-Witbeck Realty Corporation, made a revised subdivision of the 40 acre area north of Western Avenue and east of Fuller Road, calling it "Country Club Highlands", and sold lots in this from 1913 onwards. Most of the lots were sold and the houses built in this subdivision between 1914 and 1930, and by the end of 1937 only a few remained unfilled, mostly in the western part of the area on Parkwood and Elmwood Streets.

At the east end of the McKown land, on the north side of Western Avenue, William J Knowles in 1894 purchased 2 acres from Katherine McKown, and from Henry Drumm an adjacent 1 acre and his house. These lots combined became the Knowles Terrace subdivision, in which the houses were built from 1917 to 1926. William Knowles bought this property and moved here in late 1894 because he sold his previous house and farm to the newly established Albany County Club, with his former house, after architectural improvements by Marcus T Reynolds, becoming the club house.

Clubhouse of the Albany Country Club, formerly the farmhouse of William J Knowles, but architecturally renovated and enlarged for the newly established Club by Marcus T Reynolds in 1895-6. Burned down in 1963, not long after the Club land was sold for construction of the new campus of the State University of New York at Albany.

Club House, Country Club, Albany, N.Y.
Guilderland Historical Society files

Guilderland Historical Society files

The house of William J Knowles about 1898, which still exists at 1261 Western Avenue, at the eastern corner of Knowles Terrace and Western Avenue. The picture shows him, his second wife Caroline, their son William J Knowles jr about 4 years old, and his mother Hannah (age about 92) in the rocking chair next to the front door. Built by Henry and Andrew Drumm c. 1879.

William Knowles died in 1912, and his widow Caroline continued to live at Knowles Terrace until about 1926; she then moved with her son William J Knowles jr and his wife Margaret to the old McKown farmhouse on McKown Road, where they operated McKown's Grove. This included a large swimming pool fed by the west branch of the Krumkill stream, a picnic grove, a baseball field, and a dance hall. This place provided much enjoyment for McKownville residents until 1973, also hosting community events, including McKownville Fire Department annual picnic.

McKown Grove swimming pool (1958 picture). William McKown opened the Grove in 1896; William Knowles jr purchased it about 1926, and he ran the business until his death in 1948; his widow Margaret sold it in 1950. It closed in 1973, after fire damage to the dance hall, and soon after all the buildings were demolished and the swimming pool filled in.

East of the Knowles Terrace land, on the north side of Western Avenue, there is a 1 acre lot of mostly low-lying ground. This lot formerly was occupied by a house (1257 Western Avenue) built in or before 1890. The house was owned from 1910 for a long time by Alfred Garrison, a founder member of the McKownville Fire Department. It was demolished in 2004 after becoming derelict, and the lot now belongs to the Town.

East of this lot there are nine houses on the north side of Western Avenue which occupy land once the property of Charles Gimlick, who purchased 11 acres and a house in 1881. Seven of these houses were built in 1921-1925 on lots sold by Charles A Gimlick, his son. Another was built earlier in 1912 on the easternmost lot (the house still present at 1239 Western Ave). The oldest house in this row is at 1245 Western Avenue, a Federal-style brick structure. The deed selling this house and the 11 acres to Charles Gimlick in 1881, and the earlier deeds to former owners, imply that the older core of it was built in 1850 by Eli Warford. It is marked with Warford's name beside it on a map published in 1851 (Map of the vicinity of Albany and Troy, by J.C. Sidney), and it also appears on the 1866 map of Guilderland included among the Beers' maps of Albany County, marked with the name of the owner at that time, Jacob Sager. This house is without doubt the oldest surviving structure in McKownville.

The Federal-style brick house at 1245 Western Avenue. Built by Eli Warford in 1850; occupied by Jacob Sager 1864-1870; sold to Charles Gimlick 1881. The oldest surviving house in McKownville.

The McKownville Volunteer Fire Department was formed in 1918, and celebrated its 100th anniversary with a splendid parade in May 2018. From 1926, it housed its "chemical engine" in the Country Club Garage, located on the south side of Western Avenue at the west corner of Hillcrest Avenue. In the mid-1930's, a classic one-engine firehouse was built facing onto Arcadia Avenue, designed by the architect August Lux, a longtime McKownville resident (6 Elmwood Streeet). The present firehouse at the intersection with Brookwood Avenue dates from 1967, and was also designed by Lux; the distinctive weathervane originally on the cupola of the older building was moved to the new one.

The old McKownville FD firehouse; designed by August Lux and opened in 1935.

On the east of McKown Road, set back from Western Avenue, there is a fine Queen Anne-style house which was built originally much closer to Western Avenue on the east side of McKown Road. It was moved in 1948-9 to a new foundation and the present undistinguished garage replaced it on the corner. Until 1981, there was an identical matching house opposite on the west corner of McKown Road. After being used by the Huckleberry Finn housewares and furniture business, it was destroyed and replaced by a utilitarian paint store. The house on the east side was built by William McKown (1842-1924; the great-grandson of the first William McKown) about 1887; in 1920 he and his two daughters Anna and Eva were living in it; the daughters remained here until 1948. The one on the western side (1438 Western Ave - see picture below) was built in 1891, and was the home for many years of George and Ida Manville, and then of George and Florence Crouse before the Huckleberry Finn business occupied it in 1964. An attempt was made in the 1980's to place the surviving house on the National Register of Historic Places, but the proposal failed because the owner opposed it. The house was placed on the NY State Register of Historic Places.

The Queen Anne-style house that used to be on the west side of McKown Road at the intersection with Western Avenue, 1438 Western Avenue. The home of George and Ida Manville when the picture was taken, about 1917; the children are probably Helen and Jeanette Manville.
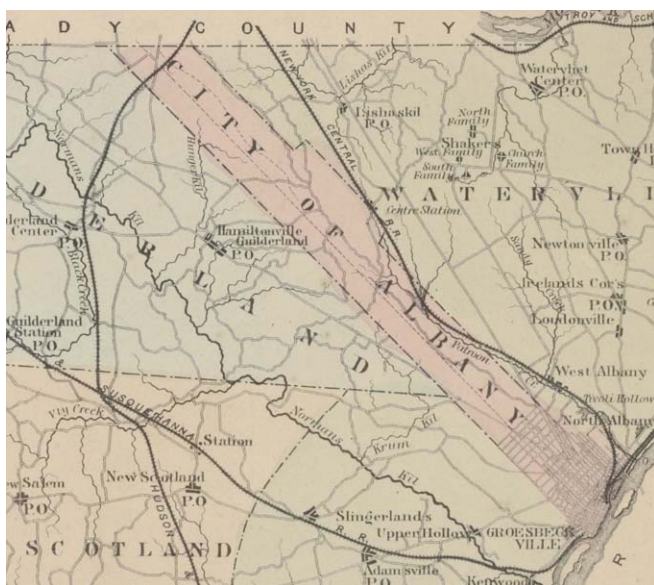
William Barnes jr was an Albany newspaper publisher and influential Republican political fixer between about 1890 and 1920. In 1909 he purchased a five acre plot in McKownville adjacent to the Albany Country Club and had a "Lodge" built among the pine trees, on top of one of the vegetated sand dunes of the Albany Pine Bush. The lot was not part of the Country Club Highlands development, but the Barnes Lodge was accessed by a driveway from Waverly Place, one of the streets in that area opening onto the north side of Western Avenue. Barnes sold in 1920, but the house remained a desirable residence until 1965 when it was sold to the Capital Area Council of Churches, who used it as a multi-faith facility for the then new adjacent campus of the State University. It burned down in 1985, but it is still (2022) listed, as "Chapel House", on the National Register of Historic Places!

The Barnes Lodge, built 1909; a private residence until purchased by the Capital Area Council of Churches in 1965. Used as a multi-denominational Chapel House for the adjacent campus of the State University at Albany until destroyed by fire in 1985.

The moving Guilderland-City of Albany boundary
William (Billy) McKown (1763-1843) possessed land that adjoined the original southern boundary of the City of Albany; this northwest-trending boundary was known as the "Corporation", or "Bleecker" Line. This line can still be seen on present-day property maps of McKownville, defining the northern boundary of the original "Country Club Highlands" development, and separating this older part of the Elmwood Street to Waverly Place area from the post-1945 developments of the northern parts of the four "wood" streets. It also forms the northern boundary of the northern lots of Knowles Terrace, and of the lots in the area east to the City of Albany-Town of Guilderland line on the north side of Western Avenue. This "Corporation" Line is no longer the City of Albany line, because the boundaries of the City of Albany were changed, three times, in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. The Town of Guilderland, and McKownville, first gained a significant area from the City of Albany and then, after about 40 years, was compelled to give most of it back.
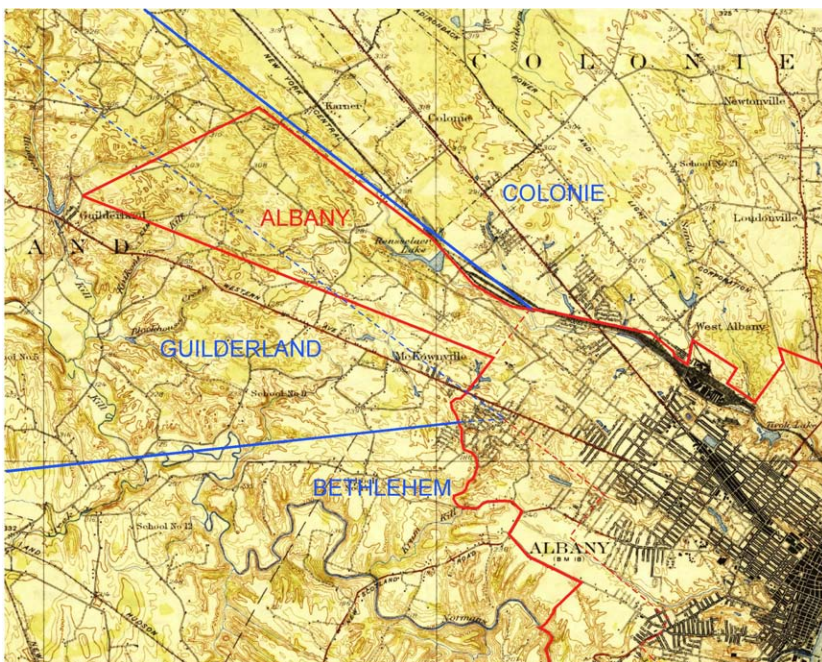

Part of the map of Albany County in the 1866 map portfolio of Beers. This shows the original City of Albany area (in red tint) with boundaries extending all the way northwest to the Schenectady County line. The southwestern boundary with Guilderland on this map is the "Corporation" Line; this defined the northern side of William McKown's property.

Part of the map of Albany County in the 1895 map portfolio of Bein. This shows the truncated City of Albany, and the expansion of Guilderland to the Watervliet boundary (later the Colonie town line).

In 1871, the parallel-sided area of the City of Albany that extended west all the way to the Schenectady County line was cut off by a new boundary, running at a right angle to the Corporation line from the position where it crosses Western Avenue, a short distance east of the present University entrance. All the area northwest of this new boundary up to the Watervliet (now Colonie) line was given to the Town of Guilderland.

Soon after 1900, the political powers of the City of Albany decided that this was all a big mistake, and in 1910 a large piece of this land was cut out of the new Guilderland and taken back into the city of Albany, and in 1916 enlarged a bit more to the presently defined boundaries. During this process of political reorganization, there was an additional loss imposed on McKownville in 1916; the roughly triangular area east of the Krumkill and south of Western Avenue to the Town of Bethlehem line, which had never previously been part of the City of Albany, was also annexed. Guilderland, and McKownville once extended nearly to Russell Road, and pre-1920 censuses include the persons who lived there in McKownville. Bethlehem lost a much larger area, with no previous gain.

Part of the 1927 USGS map of the Albany quadrangle, with the town and city boundaries emphasized. Blue - Town of Guilderland; Red - City of Albany. Red dashed line shows the former position of the City boundary before the change to the present arrangement in 1916. Blue dashed line shows the position of the Guilderland-City of Albany boundary before 1871.

Historical pictures used in these pages are from the archives of the Guilderland Historical Society. They and many others from elsewhere in Guilderland can be found in the book Images of America - Guilderland, New York, Begley, A., and Johnson, M.E., Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, South Carolina, 1999.

Historical maps of New York are easy to find and view on the excellent New York Public Library website.

Information about historic McKownville can be found in the local Albany County newspaper the Altamont Enterprise, and in particular the articles written by Fred Abele in the 1970's and early 1980's contain much of interest. The website New York Historic Newspapers contains the full searchable set of this publication from 1884; these can be accessed through the Guilderland Library website.