

*Coe-Founding North Olmsted:  
How a Grandfather and his Grandson Shaped our City*

by Jim Dubelko

When I first heard that North Olmsted was celebrating its bicentennial in 2015, I remembered thinking that was odd. Because before retiring in 2009, I had worked in the City's law department for nearly 30 years and I was fairly certain that the City was nowhere near 200 years old. Then I learned that the bicentennial celebrates the arrival of the first settler in what one day became North Olmsted. That sent me researching David Johnson Stearns and his brothers, and writing a first article for the bicentennial about how this family contributed to the founding of our community here, early in the nineteenth century.

But I still hadn't dismissed the uneasiness I felt about North Olmsted itself celebrating that bicentennial. It felt to me a little bit like the teenager who sneaks into a bar with a fake ID so that he can prematurely "celebrate" with his friends. So that set me off in the direction of writing a second article--one about the founding of North Olmsted in 1908, if for no other reason than to clear the air and make sure that no one living here in 2015 mistakenly thinks that our city is really THAT old.

As I conducted my research, with help from Dale Thomas, archivist of the Olmsted Historical Society, I learned about the important events of 1908 that led directly to the formation of North Olmsted. Meetings of residents were held in June and July, which led to the filing of a petition for incorporation. Two elections followed. The first, in September, decided the question of whether a village should be formed. The second, in December, was to elect the first officials of the new village government.

While the process of becoming a village moved along very quickly in 1908--just a little more than five months elapsed between the first residents' meeting and the election of the first village government, I discovered that there was a much longer and just as important history behind the decision of the leaders of the movement to chose the territorial boundaries for the village that they did. And, as I studied that part of the history of our city, in newspaper accounts, in documents at archives, in history collections at local libraries, and in the books of a number of local historians, I learned, surprisingly, that there were two men who more than anyone else contributed to the creation of the boundaries of North Olmsted as we know them today. Even more surprisingly, these two men came from the same family. They were Asher Miller Coe (1789-1867) and his grandson Leon Melville Coe (1845-1931). When you read their story, I think you'll agree with me that, in a very true sense, our city was "Coe-founded."

First, a Little Geography

Because the name of our city is North Olmsted, you might logically think that we were formed out of the northern part of Olmsted Township. Well, if you did, you'd only be partially correct.

When North Olmsted was created in 1908, it took about ten square miles of its land from Olmsted Township, but it also took about four square miles of land from the southeastern corner of Dover Township, the township--no longer in existence, that was located immediately to the north. If today you live north of Brookpark Road (the approximate boundary line between the two old townships), you're living in what used to be Dover Township. South of Brookpark Road, you're in old Olmsted Township. Now, this may seem at best to be an interesting bit of trivia with which to challenge your neighbors at the next block party, but as you read on about Asher Coe and his grandson Leon, I think you'll come to see, as I have, not only how North Olmsted was created out of parts of two different townships, but also why that particular mix was so important to the community.

Asher Miller Coe  
Community Organizer along the Ridge

Today, we all know that we live in a community that is centered upon and along Lorain Road. That road, running from northeast to southwest, pretty much bisects the city. When we give our friends or relatives instructions on how to find our house, we as often as not tell them whether we live north or south of Lorain Road. Lorain Road is that important to this community.

But it wasn't always that way. When David Johnson Stearns, our first settler, chopped down trees and carved out a road in 1815 along the ridge that ran through northern Olmsted Township, he didn't create all of what we know today as Lorain Road. Instead, he followed that high line of that ridge until he reached approximately the current day intersection with Porter Road, and then he turned southeast and followed a lower line of the ridge (today, Butternut Ridge Road) that branched off toward the Rocky River valley. There was a reason he did that. He was constructing the most direct route to River Road, the only well-traveled road in the township at the time, a road you could take easterly toward Cleveland, the growing little community on the Cuyahoga River, or south into Columbia Township where the closest mills along the Rocky River were located. Today, you know River Road by two other names--Mastick Road and Columbia Road south of Mastick Road.

In the early years of Olmsted Township which followed, almost all development of the community became oriented toward River Road. The first town meeting house, which doubled as a house of worship for three different Christian denominations, sat on the east end of Butternut Ridge Road, near the intersection with River Road. The first post office (Elias Frost's home) was at River Road's intersection with Kennedy Ridge Road. And the first store and hotel, built by William Romp, was up on the hill near the intersection of River and Cedar Point Roads. Asher Coe changed all this and began to reorient the community on the ridge in an east-west direction, along what became known as Coe Ridge Road in Dover Township and what was already known as Butternut Ridge Road in Olmsted Township. Today, those two ridge roads are the east and west sections of Lorain Road.

Now, I've read a lot about Asher Miller Coe the past few months. By all accounts, he was an amazing person. If you've ever read a biography of John D. Rockefeller, you know a little bit of what Asher was probably like. He was gifted with talent, business acumen and boundless energy. And he seemed to know how to put all of it to good use. He was born in 1789 in Middleton, Connecticut. He married there, became father to four children, and had a 100 acre farm. For unknown reasons--but perhaps associated with the aftermath of the long economic downturn that plagued the United States from 1815-1821, Coe decided in 1823, at age 34, to sell his farm and move his family to Ohio. After finding that land was too expensive in Ohio City, he settled in southeastern Dover Township where he eventually purchased about 1000 acres of land on the ridge, the same ridge along which the Stearns family further to the southwest had a few years earlier purchased their approximate 1000 acres of land in Olmsted Township.

Upon arriving on the section of the ridge that would soon be named after him, Asher hit the ground running. He built a large house there in 1824, a house that would become a landmark in North Olmsted--that is, until 1929 when, incredibly, it was torn down to make room for sidewalk improvements. After building this house, Asher turned his attention to cutting down trees along his section of the ridge and building a road that connected with the ridge road in Olmsted Township. According to local historian Luther Ellis Paddock, Coe did this to create an east-west road to Ridgeville (today, North Ridgeville) where the closest Universalist Church, of which he was a member, was located. Asher had now taken the first step to not only orient future community growth in an east-west direction, but also to create a common community among the people living on the same ridge, but in two different townships.

In the decade of the 1830s, Asher continued to engage in business and other activities that grew that ridge community. He added a tavern and a store onto his house to serve both travelers and the nearby population. It was said that he entertained people at the tavern with his skillful fiddle-playing. In 1831, when Isaac Hall, the Universalist minister who three years later would organize the Olmsted Township Universalist Society (today, the Olmsted Unitarian Universalist Church on Porter Road), first visited the ridge community of Olmsted and Dover Townships, he stayed at the home of "Brother Coe." Coe subsequently became a co-founder of that new church which had as its initial members many of the pioneer settlers from both northern Olmsted Township and southeastern Dover Township, including David Johnson Stearns and his brothers. Asher also started a dairy farm that became one of the largest in the region. And finally, at the end of that decade, he almost certainly was behind the mysterious annexation of territory in Dover Township to Olmsted Township that presaged the formation of North Olmsted sixty-nine years later in 1908.

So what was this mysterious annexation and what exactly was the mystery? In June 1839, a petition was granted by the Cuyahoga County Commissioners to annex to Olmsted Township eight and one-half 160 acre lots located in the southeastern part of Dover Township. The annexation was "mysterious" because the journal of the Cuyahoga County Commissioners contains no information whatsoever as to who proposed the annexation or why, and moreover

because just a little over a year later, in September 1840, and again with no explanation other than a note that it was on the “hearing of parties interested,” the annexation was canceled and the lots were “set back again” into Dover Township.

While the Cuyahoga County Commissioners may have created a mystery by failing to provide anything more than barebones information on the official record, the mystery of why annexation was requested in 1839 is not difficult to solve. Nearly one-half of the Dover Township lots that were annexed to Olmsted Township were either owned by Asher Coe or members of his family. There is just no way that Coe, who since 1824 had been organizing a community of people living on the ridge in both townships, was not the petitioner for that annexation.

What remains a mystery, though, are the reasons for the cancellation of this annexation the following year. Perhaps there had been threats or promises made by the Dover Township trustees. Perhaps, reacting to this pressure, Asher thought he could parlay it into the best of both worlds--an increase in his political influence in Dover Township politics, as well as a continued presence in the Coe/Butternut Ridge community where he already was a prominent business leader and respected member of the Universalist Society church. In any event, the cancellation of the annexation didn't seem to have hurt Asher politically. One year later, he was elected to another term as Dover Township trustee. The year after that, he was elected by the Ohio Legislature to a seven-year term as a Cuyahoga County Common Pleas judge.<sup>1</sup> And one year after that election, in 1843, he was appointed a federal postmaster for the Coe Ridge community, a position he held for 21 years until 1864.

So, while the annexation of 1839 foundered and southeastern Dover Township and northern Olmsted Township were not permanently joined together during his lifetime, Asher Coe, without question, did more than anyone else in the early years of the nineteenth century to create a single community among the people living on the ridge in these two townships. Moreover, his dream of more firmly uniting the ridge community didn't die when he died in 1867. Another Coe soon came along who picked up where Asher had left off.

A Grandson Fulfills his Grandfather's Dream:  
Leon M. Coe Lays the Tracks--Literally, for Village Formation

Asher Coe had two sons, Edwin and Andrew. Edwin, the older, didn't live long enough to become the community organizer his father was. In 1851, on his way home from fox hunting, he accidentally shot himself and died. Andrew, Asher's other son, farmed his father's lands, was active in Dover Township politics, and took care of his parents as they aged. He does not appear to have ever attempted to resurrect his father's dream. That would be left to one of Asher's grandsons, Leon.

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<sup>1</sup> In this era, you didn't need a law degree to become a judge.

Leon Melville Coe was born in Dover Township on November 5, 1845. He was only 5 years old when his father Edwin died in that hunting accident. There are no accounts of what impact his father's death had on him, but fortunately his grandfather Asher was still around and lived until Leon reached adulthood. Judge Coe must have been a positive influence on Leon, because in so many ways Leon seemed to have inherited his grandfather's talent, business acumen and boundless energy. In addition, Leon also seemed to be what we would today call a people person. One local historian described him thus: "The wiry, dynamic gent with an ever ready smile and a twinkle in his eyes--eyes that could see the good or weakness in men and beasts and could behold rainbows in a cloudless sky. . ."2

As a young man, Leon, like his uncle Andrew, farmed his grandfather's lands and became active in Dover Township politics, serving as a trustee in 1872, 1873 and 1877. However, in 1886, he moved out of Dover Township and into the Village of Berea in nearby Middleburg Township, where he purchased his brother-in-law's interest in a feed store. It was at about this time, at least from the perspective of those of us who are looking back on his life, that he began exhibiting signs of being much like his grandfather. In the decade of the 1890s, while managing the feed store, Leon also became one of the founders and early managers of the Cuyahoga County Fair in Berea. He was also elected to Berea Council in this decade, serving several terms. Most importantly for this story, Leon also in the 1890s became a business partner of Alson Pomeroy, the Berea banker who, in 1893, formed the Cleveland & Berea Railway which brought Interurban trolley service to Berea.

In 1894, Leon, very likely using political contacts that the Coe family had established over the course of three generations, as well as the current day influence of Alson Pomeroy, successfully petitioned Cuyahoga County to obtain a 25-year franchise to build an Interurban line from Cleveland to Elyria. Coe then assigned the franchise to a newly-formed corporation, the Cleveland and Elyria Railway Co., in which Pomeroy served as president and Coe as vice-president. There were several routes the new company could have taken to extend trolley service between the two cities, but Leon persuaded the company to choose the route which would take the line along the ridge road through southeastern Dover and northern Olmsted Townships, the same ridge road upon which his grandfather Asher decades earlier had begun to build a community that crossed over township lines. Within a year, Leon's company had built a bridge across the Rocky River Valley and then had laid tracks from Kamm's Corner westward, establishing trolley service from Cleveland to Elyria. On December 15, 1895, when the Interurban made its first run between the two cities, passing through southeastern Dover Township and northern Olmsted Township along the way, Leon Coe and his family, according to newspaper accounts, were among the honored guests onboard.

The Interurban had an almost immediate impact on the ridge community in Dover and Olmsted townships. In 1895, Cleveland had just become Ohio's largest city, in large part due

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Holzworth, *The Olmsted Story: A History of Olmsted Townships + Villages of Olmsted Falls, Westview and the City of North Olmsted* (Self-Published, 1966).

to rapid industrialization and the large number of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe who had come to the city to work in its factories and mills. Western Cuyahoga County, including Olmsted and Dover Townships, became the breadbasket for this growing urban population. The era of truck farming thus began, as farmers from the two townships trucked their produce and dairy products to the Cleveland market place. The bridge across the valley built by Coe's company eliminated the need to travel along the formerly-used, dangerous and slow Stranahan Hill, shortening the trip into Cleveland considerably. Soon, the Interurban also began running special cars that transported milk from the Townships' dairy farms into the City. Moreover, Interurban service induced residents of the ridge to become consumers in the Cleveland regional economy by providing transportation into the city that was cheap and quick. And once the Interurban began running regularly through Dover and Olmsted Townships, retail shops began to pop up along the ridge road in each township near the designated trolley stops. Even more firmly than his grandfather had, Leon Coe had literally laid the tracks to transforming into a single community the people living on the ridge in northern Olmsted Township with those living on the same ridge in southeastern Dover Township. When residents on the ridge found good cause to gather together in 1908 to form a village, there was no longer any question what territory that village would include.

### Epilogue

As I wrote at the beginning of this article, in the summer of 1908, thirteen years after Leon Coe's company began running trolley service along Coe Ridge and Butternut Ridge roads in southeastern Dover and northern Olmsted Townships, residents from the two townships held a series of meetings on the subject of forming their own village. They had already been welded together into a single community as a result of the work of Asher Coe and his grandson Leon, but they still might have continued to remain residents of the two separate townships indefinitely. However, in Dover Township, a movement had begun in 1900 to detach a large part of the territory of that township that lay along the lake. In 1903, this territory was incorporated as Bay Village. That loss of township property was perceived by the residents living along Coe Ridge as portending the beginning of the end of their township.

In northern Olmsted Township, residents on Butternut Ridge had already been fuming for half a century over their township's decision in 1856 to move town hall from the east end of Butternut Ridge Road and transfer it two miles south to a new location in the brand new village of Olmsted Falls. There was also a perception, which grew over the decades that followed, that too many of the township's tax dollars were being spent on improvements in and around Olmsted Falls, and that the northern part of the township was not getting its fair share of road, drainage, school and other needed infrastructure improvements. Things came to a boil at the end of 1905 when residents in the central and southern parts of the township voted down a bond issue that would have financed road and drainage improvements in the northern part of the township.

At the meetings held by residents of the two townships in the summer of 1908, a leader of the movement to form a village soon emerged. George Orman Willet was a Cleveland lawyer who in February of that year had moved into Dover Township, buying a ten-acre farm on Coe Ridge Road from relatives of Leon Coe's wife Cora. Like Leon, George Willet was a Republican and active in the business community. Undoubtedly, George and Leon knew each other and perhaps Leon had even been the one who persuaded George to move into Dover Township and become active in the movement to form a village. It would have been just the sort of thing that a grandson of community organizer Asher Coe would have done.

On December 8, 1908, George Willet was elected North Olmsted's first mayor. By all accounts, he was a good mayor, serving in the office from 1909 to 1915. He implemented needed road and drainage programs for farmers, was fiscally conservative, and the Town Hall on Dover Center Road, now an historic landmark, was built during his administration. In the same year that Willet was elected mayor of North Olmsted, Leon Coe was elected mayor of Berea. Coe served as mayor of that community from 1909 until 1912, when he was elected to the Ohio Legislature as a State Representative. During that campaign, his wife Cora died. The funeral was held in Berea, but Cora was buried in North Olmsted, in the Coe family plot at Coe Ridge Cemetery. When Leon's term as State Representative ended in 1914, he sold their house and moved back to North Olmsted, into a house on Lorain Road just west of Columbia Road that most likely had been built by his father in the 1840s.

In 1915, George Willet declined to run for what would have been a fifth term as mayor of North Olmsted.<sup>3</sup> Leon Coe ran instead, narrowly defeating opponent John D. Nichols, one-time president of the Ohio Dairymen's Association, to become North Olmsted's second mayor. Coe served a total of six terms as mayor of North Olmsted during the period 1916-1929, his long administration interrupted only by the two-year term of third mayor Thomas Pape, who defeated him in the municipal election of 1919. In 1929, Leon Coe suffered his second mayoral defeat--this time at the hands of Charles Allen Seltzer, the city's fourth mayor. Now 84 years old, Leon retired from politics. Two years later, on January 26, 1931, Leon Melville Coe died at his home on Lorain Road, thus bringing to a close the story of the grandfather and his grandson who shaped North Olmsted as we know it today.

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<sup>3</sup> The term to which he was elected in 1908 was only one year. Thereafter, Willet was re-elected to two-year terms in 1909, 1911 and 1913.