

A Brief History of Forest Home

Bruce Brittain
Community Historian

Revised July 17, 2019

The picturesque hamlet of Forest Home is located on the banks of Fall Creek in the Town of Ithaca. First settled in 1794, it quickly evolved into a water-powered industrial and milling community. Early names for the community included Sydney's, Sydney's Bridge, Phoenix Mills, Phoenixville, and Free Hollow (aka Flea Hollow).

The hamlet that we see today is the result of four distinct phases of evolution:

1800–1850: Industrial Development. This was a time of rapid development, using the strength of Fall Creek to power over 20 milling operations. These included saw mills, grist mills, woolen mills, cabinet shops, cooper shops, dye houses, blacksmith shops, a turning shop, a paint shop, a cider mill, a paper mill, a gunpowder mill, a foundry (with triphammer), a tannery and a hemp factory (among others). Roughly 30 houses were constructed during this time, with styles ranging from simple farmhouse to Federal to stately Greek Revival.

1850–1905: Mill Era Wanes. Milling continued as the major enterprise in Forest Home for the latter half of the 19th century. But as the 1800s came to a close, water power was gradually giving way to other, more reliable forms of energy, and improvements in transportation allowed for more efficient, centralized milling elsewhere. Forest Home's mills faced stronger and stronger competition, and one by one they closed. Some houses in the community were enlarged or updated during this period, often with Italianate details, but few new structures were built.

1905–1915: Cornell-Related Growth. Under the leadership of Liberty Hyde Bailey, the NYS College of Agriculture grew rapidly at this time, increasing approximately tenfold in just ten years, and bringing over a hundred new faculty members and their families to the area. Many of the new professors chose to settle in Forest Home, and around 30 new houses were built (including some student boarding houses), doubling the population of the community. Houses from this period represent various architectural styles, including Colonial Revival, Craftsman, Bungalow, Queen Anne, Prairie, and Mission, and include some kit houses. This was a time of social turmoil, as the established mill-related families took exception to the new University-related upstarts who were disrupting their neighborhood. The community's two iconic steel truss bridges, built by the nearby Groton Bridge Company, were erected during this period.

1915–Present: Continued Evolution. The last 100 years have seen slower evolution in the community. The remaining mills shut down, and Forest Home became a strictly residential neighborhood, with infill development adding another 30 houses. Architectural styles from this period are an eclectic mix, including modest suburban design, Ranch, Mid-Century Modern, Shed, Brutalist, Snout, McMansion, and various other styles, including some pre-fabricated structures (three National Homes and a Lustron). The three stone houses at the eastern edge of the hamlet were built during this period, as were the Forest Home Chapel and the Forest Home School (now the Botanic Garden's Lewis Headquarters Building). The University acquired the surrounding farms, and the hamlet is now completely encircled by lands belonging to the Cornell Botanic Gardens and Robert Trent Jones Golf Course. This separation from other neighborhoods has allowed Forest Home to retain its distinct identity.

As you explore the community, keep these four phases of development in mind. See if the various architectural styles can help you to identify which houses were constructed or updated during which era.