

Report on
Alfred Tredway White
&
the Riverside Buildings
Brooklyn, New York



Prepared by
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and commissioned by
the Brooklyn Heights Association
for presentation to
the New York City
Landmarks Preservation Commission

May 2008

INTRODUCTION

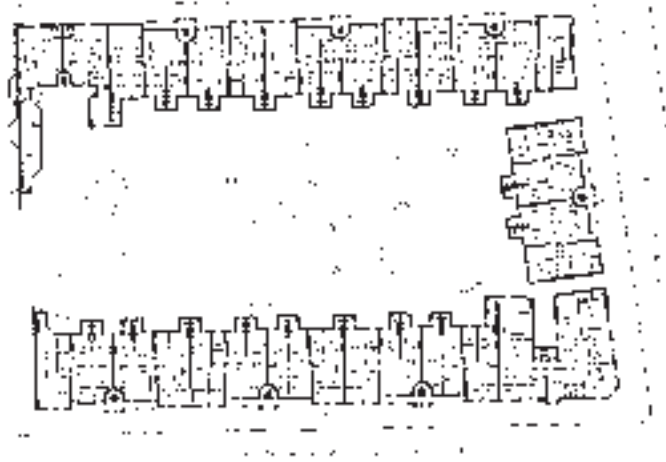
Alfred Tredway White, arguably the most important philanthropist and social reformer of 19th-century Brooklyn, was especially renowned for his work in the field of housing reform and the building of model tenements. His model housing projects comprise the Tower and Home Buildings and Workingmen's Cottages of the 1870s in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, and the Riverside Buildings (1890) in Brooklyn Heights. The Riverside Buildings are treasured by many as not just one of the outstanding examples of model housing in New York, but as one of the city's outstanding works of architecture, a masterpiece of late-Victorian design by the significant firm of William Field & Son. Though four buildings of the nine-building complex were lost to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the project was considered to retain enough of its original integrity that there was simply no question that it would be included in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District as designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965. At issue at present is the courtyard of the Riverside complex, one of its most important architectural features. While many details of the courtyard have been lost to time and inattention, the basic form of the courtyard remains. Indeed, contrary to the popular belief that the expressway truncated much or most of the courtyard, in fact very little of it, as we show below, was lost. We believe, therefore, that any decision involving the courtyard be very carefully considered in light of the importance, integrity, and landmark status of the Riverside Buildings.

Following is a history and description of the Riverside Buildings, as well as a brief biography of Alfred Tredway White, one of the greatest New Yorkers of all time.

THE RIVERSIDE BUILDINGS

At the time of his death in 1921, Alfred Tredway White lived at 40 Remsen Street (next door to his daughter and her husband Adrian Van Sinderen), between Hicks Street and Montague Terrace, on Brooklyn Heights, only a couple of blocks from the Riverside Buildings. That is why the Riverside meant more to him than did any of the many other things he built. It represented his urban ideal of rich and poor, patrician and immigrant, living side by side, each in a dwelling that met generous minimal standards of amenity, comfort, and healthfulness. When the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway was built, a substantial portion of the Riverside complex was lopped off. But it was not too truncated not to be included in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District. (And had it not been in a historic district, the project clearly would have merited individual designation. Architect Norval White, co-author of the AIA Guide to New York City, said in a New York Times interview that the Riverside was one of his eleven favorite works of architecture in New York City, along with such buildings as the Chrysler Building and Grand Central Terminal.)

The Riverside today ranges along the west side of Columbia Place to the south of Joralemon Street. If you look at a map of Brooklyn Heights, you will see that the one-block Columbia Place is, but for a two-block interruption, the southern extension of the one-block Montague Terrace, which



is the southern extension of the one-block Pierrepont Place, where Alfred Tredway White grew up. The Riverside is thus neatly nestled in what can only be called White Country. Within short blocks of one another are White's boyhood home, his Willow Place Chapel, and his own and his daughter's homes. In my *Architectural Guidebook to Brooklyn* (2001) I said "the streets around here are the most delectable on the Heights." A fantastic architectural mix reflects a historic social and economic diversity of a kind rarely found in the city. And the streets have a character that the Riverside, a looming red-brick mass relieved by Arts-and-Crafts flourishes, greatly enhances.

As built in 1890, the Riverside Buildings, designed, like White's Tower and Home Buildings and Workingmen's Cottages, by William Field & Son, occupied most of the square block bounded by Joralemon Street on the north, Columbia Place on the east, State Street on the south, and Furman Street on the west. There

were nine buildings, all six stories in height (like the Tower and Home Buildings). They were grouped around an internal courtyard so generous that the buildings occupied only 49 percent of the site. The open space, according to White in his booklet *Sun-Lighted Tenements* (1912), was equivalent to twelve 25-foot-by-100-foot "New York City lots."



There were 280 apartments and nineteen retail stores.

The plan White and the Fields adopted was essentially the same as that of the Tower and Home Buildings--the "Waterlow plan," as it was called, after the London model tenements erected by Sir Sydney Waterlow beginning in 1863. The main defining principles were two: 1) the grouping of the buildings around as generous an interior courtyard as possible; and 2) the use of open stair towers. Those two reforms alone would eliminate the worst of the tenements' squalor. Add a proper flush toilet to each apartment, and you were almost all the way home. The trick was to refine this basic scheme--as Sir Sydney had in fact been the first in Europe or America to do--so as to ensure a reasonable profitability for the building owner--"philanthropy plus five percent." Thus, White took such cost-saving measures as placing all bathing facilities in the basements (and charging a small fee for their use), rather than placing a bathtub in every apartment. (By contrast, when Charles Pratt built his "model tenements" for the employees of his Astral Oil Works, in 1885-86, he did not



conceive of it as a "model" in the sense of something that profit-seeking developers might emulate, and thus did not attempt to rein in the costs to quite the extent White felt he had to. The upshot was that the Astral, which is located on Franklin and India Streets in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, got a bathtub in each apartment.) Bathtubs were finally installed in the Riverside's apartments in 1935.

But this does not mean that White did not make significant improvements in the fourteen years separating his beginning the Home Buildings and the advent of the Riverside Buildings. The improvements came in two forms. First, the aesthetic dimension of the Riverside is, in this writer's opinion, vastly superior to the earlier complexes. Second, the courtyard was more generous in size and far more carefully designed for amenity.

Aesthetically, these 1890 buildings partake of the loose set of formal principles that it is hard to call by any name other than "late Victorian." If pressed, you'd say it was "Queen Anne," one of those stylistic names that seems to apply to anything that cannot otherwise be labeled. The 1880s was one of the most freewheeling decades in American architecture. The keynote, most of the time, was a kind of brazen picturesqueness. Very near the Riverside is a group of six row houses at the

southwest corner of Hicks and Joralemon Streets. These were built in 1886-87 to the designs of the Brooklyn architect William B. Tubby, and are justly considered one of the preeminent rows of “Queen Anne” houses in Brooklyn. We note right away the essential elements defining the aesthetic concept: profuse gables, projecting bays, profuse doorway and window arches, and brickwork that is patterned so as to lend both line and texture to the wall surfaces. There is also a general sense of the spectator’s being unable readily to tell where one house ends and another be-



gins--as though too definite a delineation would violate a kind of “organic” effect the architect is after. These houses, built by Mrs. Harriet Putnam Packer (who endowed nearby Packer Collegiate Institute), were built for well-to-do occupants. It seems to me that all these same elements are present in the Riverside Buildings, and I’d contend that the Hicks Street houses may have served to inspire William Field & Son. Two things, of course, are notably different: The scale of the Riverside is vastly greater than that of 262-272 Hicks Street, and the Riverside was built for the poor, not the rich.

The most notable and most impressive feature of the Columbia Place façade of the Riverside is its open stair towers. They are superficially similar to what one finds at the Tower and Home Buildings, but with a much greater refinement. The steel stair towers are inset from the façade within high segmental-arched openings that alternate with high vertical window units formed of similar archwork, so that the spandrels are continuous across the full façade. The spandrels are filled with brick diaperwork. This is key, for there is a play of sensuous contrasts--steel and brick, surface and void, patterned and plain brickwork. Then the façade is rhythmically punctuated by towered entry units via which the open corridors are accessed. These towers also rise a story higher than the rest of the building to water tank enclosures. The whole thing is a beautiful essay in how to break up what might so easily have been a visually monotonous bulk, and do it more or less on the cheap, without any fancy materials but a lot of ingenuity. It’s overall one of New York’s masterpieces of late Victorian design.



In 1890, the Danish-American photojournalist Jacob A. Riis wrote an enormously influential book on New York's slums, *How the Other Half Lives*. Toward the book's end he discusses possible solutions to the tenement-house problem, and singles out Alfred Tredway White, and the Riverside Buildings, for special praise. The Riverside, Riis wrote,

may be justly regarded as the beau ideal of the model tenement for a great city like New York. It embodies all the good features of Sir Sydney Waterlow's London plan, with improvements suggested by the builder's own experience. Its chief merit is that it gathers three hundred real homes, not simply three hundred families, under one roof.



The Riverside Buildings met a doleful fate in the late 1940s when Robert Moses built the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Readers of Robert A. Caro's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Moses, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1974) will find little detail on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. The reason is that if Caro had detailed every one of Moses's expressway projects, the book would have had to be ten times longer. Therefore, he chose, in an amazing chapter called "One Mile," to detail the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and its impact on the East Tremont section of the Bronx. Caro did not, so far as I can tell, intend to claim that the Cross-Bronx was in some sense the most egregious of the expressway projects, but rather to indicate that it was typical. Certainly, the

Brooklyn-Queens Expressway wreaked as great destruction on parts of Brooklyn as the Cross-Bronx did on the Bronx. The Tower and Home Buildings in Cobble Hill, for example, are now directly across Hicks Street from the expressway trench. Williamsburg was plain eviscerated by the expressway. And while Brooklyn Heights got the priceless promenade cantilevered over the expressway, it is well to note that at its northern and southern ends the Heights sustained a great deal of damage. The southern end is where the Riverside Buildings stand. At least the Tower and Home Buildings remained intact, even as their setting was radically altered. The Riverside got four of its nine buildings just lopped off as the expressway made a sweeping westward curve at Atlantic Avenue to run along Furman Street at the wa-



ter's edge. This knocked out the Furman Street side of the Riverside and also truncated the courtyard. Nonetheless, enough of the courtyard remains to give a vivid sense of the original arrangements, and was explicitly included in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District. That is why the buildings' present owner must petition the Landmarks Preservation Commission for permission to alter the courtyard in such a way as to accommodate two levels of parking beneath it, as well as landscaping dramatically different from the original design.

It is worth noting just how much of the courtyard was lost to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. In fact very little of it was lost. And while its maintenance in recent years has been abysmal, most of its original defining features are still identifiable. At its southern end was originally a children's playground. This bore the brunt of expressway construction. To the playground's north was the lovely bandstand where White offered his tenants weekend band concerts. Farther north was a fountain. All these were lovely amenities at the time, and would be lovely amenities still if they had been maintained, as they could and should have been.

The current owner's proposal to remodel the courtyard so as to accommodate two levels of parking with a landscaped roof unfortunately violates every precept laid down in the landmark designation of the project.

Jacob Riis wrote of the Riverside:

There are no air-shafts, for they are not needed. Every room, under the admirable arrangement of the plan, looks out either upon the street or the yard, that is nothing less than a great park with a play-ground set apart for the children, where they may dig in the sand to their heart's content. Weekly concerts are given in the park by a brass band. The drying of clothes is done on the roof,



where racks are fitted up for the purpose. The outside stairways end in turrets that give the buildings a very smart appearance. Mr. White never has any trouble with his tenants, though he gathers in the poorest; nor do his tenements have anything of the "institution character" that occasionally attaches to ventures of this sort, to their damage. They are like a big village of contented people, who live in peace with one another because they have elbowroom even under one big roof.



One feels that as Alfred Tredway White witnesses from the great beyond the fate of his jewel, he winces with sadness that the kind of building owner he once fought against should in 2008 not only still prevail in the city but should, in fact, own and dishonor the Riverside Buildings. White, one may further presume, would place all his hopes in the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to do the right thing.

ALFRED TREDWAY WHITE (1846-1921)

Alfred Tredway White was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1846. (Brooklyn had been incorporated as a city for only twelve years.) He was the son of Alexander Moss White (1815-1906), a partner in the importing firm of W.M. & A.M. White, and of Elizabeth Hart Tredway. Alexander White was born in Connecticut of old Massachusetts stock, and came down to Brooklyn in the New England diaspora of the early 19th century. Successful in business, he built a brownstone mansion for his family, still standing at 2 Pierrepont Place. (His neighbors to the south were the Abiel Abbot Lows, to the north the Henry Evelyn Pierreponts.)

Alfred White received his secondary education at the Brooklyn Collegiate and Polytechnic Institute, then on Livingston Street. (The name was changed to Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute in 1889, and the secondary division moved in 1917 to Bay Ridge, where it became known as “Poly Prep.”) In the late 19th century, this was one of the most distinguished secondary schools in the United States. After graduating, White enrolled at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, where he studied civil engineering, receiving a degree in 1865. Following this, he became a partner in his father’s importing business. His thoughts tended to wander away from business, however. He was involved with a young people’s group at his church, First Unitarian on Pierrepont Street at Monroe Place in Brooklyn Heights, and in 1867 started teaching at a settlement school the group had formed. Two years later, the church’s pastor, Alfred P. Putnam, asked White to oversee all the church’s settlement activities. In this capacity he got an up-close look at the appalling living conditions of the urban poor, and combined with his background in civil engineering, he decided to concentrate his energies on the physical improvement, especially in the field of housing, of his native city.



Among other things, White built “model tenements,” or “philanthropic tenements,” as the architectural historian Richard Plunz calls them. Tenement House Acts in 1867 and 1879 (the latter giving us the infamous “dumbbell tenement”) did little to ameliorate the squalor of the slums. The problems endemic to most housing types in New York, whether for rich or poor, namely lack of natural light and ventilation, were exacerbated in the tenements of the very poor by extreme overcrowding of people in individual apartments; by overbuilding of 25-foot-by-100-foot lots with “back buildings”; by indescribably awful sanitary conditions brought on by the excessive amounts of waste produced by the numbers of people

packed into buildings never designed to accommodate so many, the lack of indoor plumbing, outdoor toilets not connected to the city sewer system and seldom cleaned out, and the use of airshafts (mandated in the 1879 Tenement House Act) as convenient and often the only receptacles for human waste. The presence of so much garbage together with poor building maintenance led inevitably to massive infestations of vermin. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, vermin, and lack of ventilation made tenement houses into virulent breeding grounds of the infectious diseases that were once the scourge of metropolitan life. “Well it is to build hospitals for the cure of disease,” wrote Alfred Tredway White, “but better to build homes which will prevent it.”

With government unready or unwilling to do its part, private citizens of means and compassion stepped up to see if they might make a difference. Among the first of these was Alfred Tredway White. White had read of the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company of London. In 1863, under Sir Sydney Hedley Waterlow (1822-1906), the company erected model tenements ultimately housing some 30,000 tenants throughout the slums of London, and forming what we would call a “public-private partnership” with the national government. Anyone who has read Charles Dickens knows what conditions for the poor were like in London at the time. Conditions in New York were scarcely better. White went to England for a look at Sir Sydney’s handiwork. He returned to Brooklyn resolved to build something similar, perhaps better.



With financial backing from his father, in 1876-77 White built the Home Buildings, a complex of two apartment buildings at Hicks and Baltic streets in the South Brooklyn neighborhood known today as Cobble Hill. In 1878-79 White built the Tower Buildings, three in number, at Hicks and Warren streets, adjacent to the Home Buildings. Also in 1878 White built, immediately to the east of the Tower and Home Buildings, the group of diminutive “Workingmen’s Cottages” that further answered to the need for decent housing for the working classes. The design of all these buildings is credited to William Field & Son. Little is known of this firm. For example, the AIA Guide to New York City notes nothing by the firm aside from its model tenement work with White. As a result, most people presume that White himself was probably the true designer of his apartment complexes, while the Field

firm may have helped out with the technicalities. I am not sure this is true. Though little known today, William Field & Son was in fact a very prominent architectural firm. Among its major works were the Hamilton Building of 1860-61, built for Abiel Abbot Low and the original home of the Long Island Historical Society, at Court and Joralemon streets, and the Oriental Hotel, built for Austin Corbin at Manhattan Beach in 1880. The Oriental, on the site of Kingsborough Community College, was one of the best-known resort hotels in America. Neither of these buildings still stands.

More significant is that the firm designed the Unity Temple (1868) of the Third Unitarian Society at Classon Avenue and Lefferts Place in Brooklyn. The firm was, in other words, one that White knew through the Unitarian church, and as such a firm that shared White's social ideals. Also, in 1879 William Field & Son borrowed the plan of the Tower Buildings for the Monroe, a model tenement project built by the estate of Abner Chichester on Monroe Street in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. One would conclude from this that the Field firm apparently "owned" the design. White employed William Field & Son not only on the Tower and Home Buildings and Workingmen's Cottages in 1876-79, but again in 1890 on the Riverside Buildings, about which more anon.

Together, the Tower and Home Buildings originally comprised 218 units. The buildings rose six stories with open stair towers, so that every apartment opened to the outdoors. One of the most dispiriting things in tenement houses was the corridors, which were typically not illuminated, received no air, were repositories of garbage, gathered the stifling cooking, garbage, and human smells from all the apartments, and were dangerous places where accidents, robberies, and rapes often occurred. The outdoor corridors meant light and air, dissipation of odors, and a reduction in nefarious activities.

Rooms were designed to receive maximum amounts of sunlight and through-ventilation. These were achieved by wrapping the buildings around generous courtyards, not the putrid airshafts soon to be mandated by the Tenement House Act of 1879. Also, while middle-class residences had had flush toilets connected to the city sewer system since the 1840s, it was still shockingly the case in the late 1870s that many tenements lacked such a thing. Even when they did have toilets connected to the sewer system, the number of toilets was inadequate to the number of people requiring their use, and they were so foul and so often in disrepair that tenants often relied upon commodes or chamber pots. White ensured that each unit in the Tower and Home Buildings and Workingmen's Cottages had its own toilet, as well as running water. The units did not, however, have bathtubs. Bathing was done communally, in the buildings' basements.

When the Tower Buildings opened in 1879, the two- to five-room apartments were rented for \$7.20 to \$14.00 per month. (According to the Inflation Calculator, www.westegg.com/inflation, that translates to \$137.72 to \$267.80 in 2005 dollars.)

Alfred Tredway White enunciated a motto when he built the Tower and Home Buildings: “philanthropy plus five percent.” Not long ago, I attended a lecture in which an esteemed architectural historian scoffed at that motto, suggesting that White was profiteering in tenement building. Nothing could be further from the truth. The whole point of model tenements, as White and other housing reformers saw it, was not to build housing developments as one-off charitable enterprises, but rather to demonstrate, through scientific planning and the strictest cost accounting, to other developers that humanly decent housing could be built without a loss of reasonable profit. Only then would critical amounts of decent housing be built. White couldn’t have had less need of the five percent return on his buildings. But he knew that other builders whom he was counting upon to follow his lead were not going to be philanthropists, but rather businessmen, and the “model” White created had to appeal to the businessman as well as the reformer. Another point worth stating is that White believed his tenants’ dignity was better served if they knew they were contributing to the building owner’s profits, and so were not the wards of charity.

In 1878, in the midst of construction of the Tower Buildings and Workingmen’s Cottages, White married Annie Jean Lyman, the niece of Abiel Abbot Low. The Lows like the Whites worshipped at First Unitarian Church, and Annie taught at the same settlement school as White. She was throughout her life well known for her charity work. The couple’s two daughters also taught at the settlement school. By this time, the school had moved into a building White had built in 1875-76 on Willow Place, right around the corner from where he would build the Riverside Buildings fourteen years later. The school building, known as Willow Place Chapel, still stands, a charming Gothic miniature, set behind a garden, designed by Russell Sturgis, a prominent architectural writer as well as architect. White’s concern with city children’s health led to his becoming an early member of the Brooklyn Children’s Aid Society and a founder of the Brooklyn Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. (White had been inspired to visit the Waterlow tenements in London after reading an article about them by Children’s Aid Society founder Charles Loring Brace, who later became White’s friend and was one of the first visitors to inspect the Home Buildings.) In 1878 White and Annie’s cousin, Seth Low, the future mayor of Brooklyn, president of Columbia University, and mayor of New York City, co-founded the Brooklyn Borough of Charities, and for the next thirty years White served as either its president or its secretary.

White was the principal founder and financial backer of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, which opened in 1910. In the garden today can be found a lovely stele with a bronze relief depicting White, by the sculptor Daniel Chester French. White and his friend Frederic Pratt, the son of kerosene magnate Charles Pratt, were responsible for the creation of Marine Park, where today there is a Pratt-White Field. White’s philanthropic work extended well beyond

Brooklyn. "Tuskegee Institute," said Booker T. Washington, "would not have been possible had it not been for the encouragement and inspiration I received from Mr. White and his family." (Tuskegee still has an Alexander Moss White Hall.) White sat on the boards of both Alabama's Tuskegee Institute and Virginia's Hampton Institute, both of whose trustees also included Annie's cousin, and Alfred's childhood buddy from next door, Seth Low. White endowed a chair at Harvard University in the field of "social ethics." (The chair in social ethics is still very much alive and well at Harvard.) There's much more besides to White's life. For example, he was an original trustee of the Russell Sage Foundation and as he was a close associate of Robert W. de Forest, who formed the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and oversaw the creation of Forest Hills Gardens in Queens, N.Y., we can see that the line of White's professional involvements describes some forty years of the most progressive architecture and planning in New York history. He was with Frederic Pratt the principal patron of the urban planner Charles Dyer Norton and the pioneering Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs. White also wrote several influential books and booklets, including *Improved Dwellings for the Laboring Classes* (1879), *Better Homes for Workingmen* (1885), and *Sun-Lighted Tenements: Thirty-five Years Experience as an Owner* (1912). (The last of these, with its information about the Riverside Buildings, is included in photocopy form as an addendum to this report.) Finally, as a friend and colleague of Lawrence Veiller, White exerted a powerful influence on the Tenement House Law of 1901, the first of the tenement house laws to make a real difference, described by the historian Roy Lubove as "among the most significant municipal reforms of the Progressive era."

White died in an unfortunately freakish manner. He had never stopped working for the family firm, W.M. & A.M. White, at 14 Wall Street. In January 1921, at the age of 75, he had just put in a day at the office. A vigorous lover of outdoor sports, he'd been keenly looking forward to a weekend's outing to Orange County, New York. An avid skater, on Saturday, January 29, he went out on Forest Lake, on the estate of Mrs. Edward H. Harriman. The ice buckled and he was pulled under and drowned. His body was recovered the next day by W. Averell Harriman. White's wife had died the year previous. Both the daughters had married members of the old Van Sinderen family of Brooklyn Heights. One of the two daughters had died two years before her father. White left his entire estate--\$15 million--to his surviving daughter, Annie Jean Van Sinderen, of 42 Remsen Street. On April 4 of that year, Robert W. de Forest organized a memorial service for White at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. White was hailed as "Brooklyn's foremost citizen."

When White died, former President William Howard Taft said, "I don't know any other one in all that six millions of New York City who would leave such a void as he does." Perhaps more notably, the fine American man of letters John Jay Chapman wrote a lovely poem printed on the very day of its composition, January 31, 1921:

*Have we a moment? Will this great machine,
Our Modern Brooklyn, stand and mourn apart
To honor one who, when its streets were green
With shade-trees, took his village to his heart?*

*A man all goodness, born to save and bless,
Whose business was a kind of ministry,
Who found his own in others' happiness
And saw in life such things as angels see;*

*And wrote them out, life-size, in park and plan,
Club, tenement, the drama, libraries--
Whatever could enrich the life of man:
They were his passions, not his charities.*

*As vigorous as a tree whose leafy crown
of seventy Summers wears a younger glow,
He shed his Benediction o'er the town.
Happy the spot where such an oak can grow!*

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