

Streetscapes/Sutton Place, Sutton Place South and One Sutton Place North; A Prestigious Enclave With a Name in Question

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THERE'S NoHo and SoHo, so what about SuttNo? That's the key to a namesmanship argument between the Sutton Area Community, a neighborhood group, and the developer Sheldon Solow. Mr. Solow has taken the name One Sutton Place North for his new building just outside the Sutton Place boundary, and the Sutton Area Community considers the name a NoNo.

Mr. Solow's sleek new black glass apartment tower is on a midblock site between 60th and 61st Streets, just west of York Avenue and just north of the northern end of Sutton Place at 59th Street (Sutton Place runs beside the East River from 57th to 59th, Sutton Place South from 53rd to 57th.) Although the building's name is One Sutton Place North, it uses the street address of 420 East 61st Street.

Charles S. Kelly, the chairman of the community group's historic preservation committee, says that extending the Sutton Place label north of 59th jeopardizes "the integrity of the residential area -- there are commercial properties farther north, a filling station, a hotel."

Suzanne M. Halpin, a spokeswoman for Mr. Solow, said that he plans another building, adjacent to the new tower, that will front on York Avenue, and that together "they will be architectural extensions of Sutton Place and Sutton Place South."

When it comes to names, the question of the origin of the word "Sutton" as used in the name of the prestigious enclave of Sutton Place has no easy answer. Although accounts as early as the 1920's identify Effingham B. Sutton as its original developer, no 19th century document has been found connecting him to the buildings that went up there in the 1870's and 1880's.

It is known that Sutton ran a clipper ship line to the California coast in the 1850's that served Gold Rush hopefuls, and that he lived on West 29th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues (a block that was also called Lamartine Place and was set apart from the rest of the city's street grid because of separate numbering).

In 1875 a consortium of developers that included James Stokes, William Dodge and D. Willis James began to acquire property on Avenue A in the East 50's, on what is now called Sutton Place. Deed patterns suggest that they were working with a builder, Andrew Kerwin, who in 1879 put up the original Sutton Place enclave, 24 single-family brownstones on the block bounded by 58th and 59th Streets and Avenue A and the East River. Half of them faced the avenue and half faced a new street along the river briefly named Riverview Terrace. A few of those houses survive in recognizable form, three stories high with a stoop.

Someone renamed the Avenue A side of the block Sutton Place. The earliest use of the term in the ProQuest digitized version of The New York Times occurs in 1883, in an obituary for Dr. David Holton, who died at his house on "Sutton-place."

In this earliest period, Sutton Place began only at 58th Street, and extended up through 60th Street. Four-story apartment buildings soon went up, most built by Kerwin, on both sides of Sutton Place between 59th and 60th. The last of the buildings between 59th and 60th were demolished for the Queensboro Bridge in the early 1900's.

Between 1880 and 1886 two developers built up the east side of what was then still Avenue A, between 57th and 58th Streets. In 1897, the block's residents petitioned the city's Board of Aldermen to rename their section Sutton Place. After that year the street covered three blocks, from 57th to 60th. Now the block of 57th to 58th, with its row of 1920's town houses and mansions, is considered the principal Sutton Place block.

NO one expected that a little out-of-the-way street would become one of the fanciest addresses in New York. But in 1920 a group of investors, apparently including the architect Eliot Cross, the Henry Phipps Estates (the real estate investment arm of the family of the steel magnate Henry Phipps) and the fledgling real estate firm of Webb & Knapp, began acquiring property in the area, especially the block of old brownstone buildings on the east side of Sutton Place from 57th to 58th, buildings that bordered directly on the East River.

This consortium resold the old buildings to a group of buyers that included Anne Vanderbilt, the widow of William K. Vanderbilt (the grandson of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, the builder of the original Grand Central Terminal); Anne Morgan, the daughter of J. Pierpont Morgan; and the decorator Elsie de Wolfe. These new owners remade the old brownstone buildings into new town houses of varying design. Mrs. Vanderbilt moved into the new house at 1 Sutton Place, at the northeast corner of 57th Street, and the arrival of the new residents shifted the social geography of New York slightly to the east.

"Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt to Live in Avenue A" was the headline in The Times, which used the original name to emphasize the contrast and noted that she was leading "an exodus of society from Fifth Avenue and elsewhere." The plots were snapped up, and the residents tore down the old backyard fences to create a common rear garden, a huge greensward overlooking the eddying whirlpools of the river.

Some of the investors had a much broader vision, for they also bought surrounding property, to which the gilt edge of the revived Sutton Place lent its golden glow. In 1925 the Phipps Estates, with Eliot Cross's architectural firm, Cross & Cross, filed plans for a new 13-story apartment house on the block between 56th and 57th Streets along the river. This was officially Avenue A, but the builders called their building 1 Sutton Place South, and the Sutton Place South designation now extends south to 53rd.

The Vanderbilt house has "1 Sutton Place North" carved in its limestone, but it appears that it was only an informal usage, created after -- perhaps well after -- the naming of Sutton Place South.

In 1928, Sutton Place from 59th to 60th Street, and Avenue A north of 60th, were renamed York Avenue, in honor of the World War I hero Sgt. Alvin York. In 1929, The New York Sun, working from information it did not attribute, tied the origins of Sutton Place to Effingham Sutton. Two decades later Sutton Terrace, a three-building complex, went up on the west side of York Avenue from 62nd to 63rd. (Today, York Avenue is dominated by modern apartment buildings of indifferent character.)

There the saga of the Sutton name remained, until recently. Mr. Kelly of Sutton Area Community said his group felt that the One Sutton Place North name of Mr. Solow's building would be confusing because of the carved legend on the Vanderbilt house. Mr. Kelly said that if Mr. Solow does not give up the name, "we may seek an injunction."

Ms. Halpin, Mr. Solow's spokeswoman, said that Mr. Solow is making a distinction between the building's name and its address -- 420 East 61st Street. But the Manhattan borough president's office, which is responsible for street addresses, has become involved in the dispute, saying it objects to the use of an address as a building's name.

Daniel Wilson, a spokesman for C. Virginia Fields, the borough president, said that using a name that also appears to be an address might confuse people. Mr. Wilson said that the situation was under review.