



FALL 2021

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THE DOUGLASTON AND LITTLE NECK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Preserving and protecting the historical significance of Douglaston and Little Neck
and adjacent nature preserves.*



The "Orientalist" theme of the Chu Chin Chow Ball was based on a popular musical comedy inspired by "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves."



Edith at the Ball posing with the Miss America prize, a golden apple. Her photo was the first to ever be transmitted by wire, from New York to Chicago.

A LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

THE GIRL OF THE GOLDEN APPLE

**DLNHS ANNUAL MEETING:
PRESERVING OUR WATER, OUR AIR**

**LITTLE NECK'S TERRA COTTA
JUNGLE**

A ZIP CODE TALE: A CORRECTION

THE GIRL OF THE GOLDEN APPLE: THE *REAL* FIRST MISS AMERICA

More than a century ago, as World War I ended and the Jazz Age began, New York's newspapers lit up with the story of a new contest to find the most beautiful woman in the country. The contest was called "Miss America", and just for the history books, the very first winner was none other than—yes—a Douglaston girl!

—continued on page 4

LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Hello Douglaston and Little Neck Historical Society members and friends near and far. As we head deeper into Autumn, I hope all of you had a safe and fun Summer!!!

During these trying Covid times, our newsletters have continued to enlighten our members and other readers with engrossing stories about our Douglaston and Little Neck neighborhoods. Thanks for the positive feedback!

In this newsletter you will read about a very famous person—for a time—from more than a century ago: the winner of the very first Miss America Pageant. You will find, as well, a story about our own local environmental movement that gives “historic perspective” to today’s climate change crisis.

We also continue a special photographic series begun last year in the early days of the pandemic, when the streets of Little Neck’s commercial district were deserted. This issue focuses on Little Neck’s historic terra cotta architecture seen along Northern Boulevard.

This fall DLNHS will be partnering again--after taking a break last year--with Open House New York and the Douglas House Trust of the Douglaston Club, for a live in-person tour on Saturday, October 16, of the newly-renovated interior, followed by cider and cookies on the front porch. Register online at the Open House NY website—this tour will sell out fast! Later this year we will be announcing new tours--virtual and in-person--for 2022. Among them is a local Garden Tour, tentatively planned for the Spring.

Work continues on preparing our collection of historic architectural blueprints of houses and other buildings, amassed over the past thirty years, to be transferred permanently to the New York Historical Society. Among them are original blueprints, some on extremely fragile paper, for some of the earliest houses built in Douglas Manor. NYHS will conserve and digitize the blueprints and make them fully accessible to the public.

A big thanks to all of you who continue to support our mission during these difficult times. We hope to see you at one of our events soon!

Happy Historical Harvesting!

Pamela Broderick

PRESERVING OUR WATER, OUR AIR: WALTER MUGDAN ON THE MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Douglaston and Little Neck Historical Society Annual Meeting, May 22, 2021

Those of us in the DLNHS are interested in the past—we are, after all, a historical society. But Walter Mugdan, our neighbor and speaker at the DLNHS annual meeting on May 22, 2021, called us to think about the future of our planet, the larger home in which we live. To do so, Mugdan first took us back to the beginnings of the modern environmental movement a little more than fifty years ago, and reviewed the tremendous progress that has been made since the movement’s birth on April 22, 1970—the first Earth Day.

Back then, we faced a frightening series of environmental hazards: pesticides, lead, asbestos, toxic chemicals, and pathogens. Pesticides—their hideous effects broadcast by environmentalist pioneer Rachel Carson in her 1962 book, *Silent Spring*—kill the pests that destroy crops and cause diseases, but many linger in the environment and kill birds and other benign creatures while becoming ineffective through overuse.

Lead—plumbum in Latin, giving us “plumber” and “plumbing”—has been used since ancient times to make water pipes and a host of industrial products, but it is highly toxic in all its forms, and is a particular danger to children living in our older homes which until 1978 had been painted, repeatedly, with lead-based paint. Like lead, asbestos has been used beneficially since ancient times, employed for insulation and fire prevention—but its particles are deadly to humans who inhale them.

—continued on page 6

LITTLE NECK'S TERRA COTTA JUNGLE

In this second installment on Little Neck architecture, DLNHS board member Peter Reinharz has focused his lens on the terra cotta clad buildings in the commercial district on Northern Boulevard, from the Nassau border to Marathon Parkway. Between the late 1800s and the 1930s, terra cotta became a new and popular material used to ornament buildings. Terra cotta was lightweight and fireproof, and the fired clay it is made from was easily molded to make details that would otherwise be too expensive to make in stone. Much of the terra cotta used in this era came from two Queens factories—the Atlantic Terra-Cotta Company, and the New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Company.



1



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Near the intersection with Glenwood Street is a row of identical two-story buildings that date from the 1920s and include the well-known La Baraka restaurant, at 255-09 Northern Boulevard. (Photo 1) Note the large wood and glass doors likely salvaged from a 19th-century brownstone along with the stained-glass windows that also came from another—and much older—building. Pointed terra cotta arched tiles above the storefront and small terra cotta minarets adorning the façade suggest exotic Moorish architecture. Classical floral motifs decorate a bracket detail. (Photo 2)



2

On the south side of the street, a similar terra cotta roofline crowns the entire row of stores westward to the building at 254-18 Northern Boulevard that once housed the Little Neck movie theater, built in 1929, and which sports a different decorative balustrade along the roofline. Atop the arched roof over the original theater entrance sits a “Victory Eagle,” an architectural accent commonly found both in the U.S. and in Europe to mark the end of World War I. (Photo 3) The building also sports a two-story-high Palladian-style window, and Classically-styled fluted terra cotta pilasters are topped with bold scrolls. Above that are round stylized flowers called rosettes, a common feature of ancient Classical architecture. (Photo 4)



5

Across the street from the old theater sits a series of simple single-story brick stores. Although most of the surfaces are covered with modern additions, there are still some glimpses of the original façade that exhibit fascinating details and expert craftsmanship. At the Little Neck Video store at 254-12 Northern Boulevard, for example, note the subtle placement of a decorative terra cotta flower medallion set into the brickwork, now painted over. (Photo 5)

THE GIRL OF THE GOLDEN APPLE, *continued*

But if you visit the website for the official history of the Miss America Pageant, you will find no mention of our local Douglaston beauty, nor that first Miss America contest held in 1919.

Our intrepid Douglaston beauty, dressed in an ivory satin three-piece “Oriental style” costume with see-through harem pants, and an elaborate, bejeweled headdress, beat out 500 other contenders for the title.

In the process, she managed to derail the whole concept of the Miss America contest on that very first night. When she accepted the prize, she said: “I don’t deserve this. There are lots of girls prettier than I am.”

And with that, she fled the scene as quickly as Cinderella did the Ball, and before any reporter—and there were throngs of them—could ask her a question about who she was or where she came from.

For she had a little secret: she wasn’t a “Miss” at all, but a divorced mother of two young boys. Her name was Edith Norman Hyde. She grew up in a modest cottage on Douglaston’s Main Street, today’s Douglaston Parkway. Her father, Major Raymond Newton Hyde, was a well-known landscape artist.

Edith was no stranger to keeping secrets—or scandal. In 1909, when she was sixteen, Edith eloped with Clarence Aaron “Tod” Robbins. Tod was a twenty-year-old student at Williams College, a well-known member of Brooklyn society, and heir to a multi-million dollar dry goods and real estate fortune.

His aunt was Mrs. Frederick T. Parsons, who owned the seven-acre Douglaston estate known as “Cozy Point” on Bay Street, where he spent summers. When Edith and Tod revealed their secret (both were still living at their parents’ homes), high society was shocked.

But the marriage was short-lived. They divorced in 1914. Tod went on to fame as a best-selling author of horror and mystery fiction. Edith’s antics kept the tabloids busy for years after she was selected as Miss America.

The first Miss America contest was actually a costume ball—the Chu Chin Chow Ball (named for a hit musical comedy of the time)—that celebrated the end of the “season” for New York society.

The parade of beauties in the glamorous ballroom of the Hotel des Artistes on West 67th Street started at midnight. The five judges were among the most famous artists and illustrators of the day, and included J. Montgomery Flagg, Charles Dana Gibson, and Howard Chandler Christy.



Edith’s father, Major Raymond Newton Hyde, was part of the artists’ colony of painters and illustrators established at Douglas Manor in the early 20th century.



Clarence Aaron “Tod” Robbins, Edith’s first husband.



The Major and his wife Lillian built a new Georgian Revival style house at 3 Hillcrest Avenue in 1920. He died there in 1933 at age 68.



The Ball, with Miss America at the center of a circle of admirers.

A Washington Post reporter rediscovered her in the 1960s, and wrote about the latest, decidedly un-glamorous chapter in Edith's life:

"In the Gypsy Tea Kettle, a second floor restaurant over a hamburger stand and a cleaners near Times Square, a lady reads cards for the desperate, the lovelorn, the lonely old women in rusty black crepe and space shoes, and young, dreaming girls in miniskirts. The customers know her only as Pandora, who wears a black suit and pearls around the neck and wrist.

"Her face is well wrinkled for her sixty-nine years, but it somehow doesn't seem to matter. The high cheekbones, the sharp blue eyes, the imperiousness of her manner are what you notice."

A decade later, another reporter "rediscovered" her yet again, this time in a "posh" nursing home in Manhattan. He asked to take a photo:

"At first she declined, but after being told that she looked wonderful, she agreed to 'just one.' In fact, that was all she would allow to be taken and that one without the hint of a smile. 'That is the way I want them to remember me,' she noted and gestured to her aide that it was time to be wheeled away. 'It is time for my nap!' That was the last interview of the First Miss America."

Edith died at the nursing home in 1978. She was eighty-six years old.

—Kevin Wolfe

Just after 2 am, with the competition narrowed down to a dozen, the judges selected Edith as "Miss America." She grabbed the prize, a golden apple, and disappeared into the night.

By morning, Edith was headline news across the country, and reporters were searching high and low for the mysterious beauty. By nightfall, a New York Times reporter tracked her down and revealed Edith's secret.

In the frenzied tabloid aftermath, she went on to become one of the most famous women in the world. Florenz Ziegfeld offered her a role in his Ziegfeld Follies. Hollywood offered her movie roles. She turned down both.

Edith went on to marry twice more, both times to well-off society figures. She moved to Europe, where she was the proverbial party girl. But by the 1950s, ravaged by alcoholism and forgotten by the press, she sobered up. She transformed herself into "Pandora."



Edith poses for a photo in 1969 with a portrait that was painted of her by the famous illustrator James Montgomery Flagg. Flagg was one of the judges who selected her as the first Miss America at the Chu Chin Chow Ball exactly 50 years earlier.

Correction to the Spring 2021 newsletter story *The Tale of the Zip Code*

In the Spring 2021 newsletter, the story entitled "The Tale of the Zip Code" mistakenly reported on page 6 that the name "Douglaston" arose when William P. Douglas donated a building to the North Shore Railroad (today's Long Island Rail Road) to serve as a station on the condition that the stop be called "Douglaston." In fact, the name "Douglaston" was adopted three years later, in 1870, when Douglas donated a large sum to renovate the station that had previously been called "Main Avenue Little Neck."

PRESERVING OUR WATER, OUR AIR, *continued*

Petroleum-based and chlorinated solvents used in dry cleaning and other chemicals like PCBs and DDT, furthermore, present multiple health hazards, and spread widely in human communities through improper disposal methods that contaminate soils and groundwater. Nitrogen, used in fertilizer, helps lawns and food crops grow, but when extra quantities flow into nearby water bodies, it promotes the growth of algae which, as they disintegrate, consume dissolved oxygen necessary to aquatic animal life. And pathogens, both bacterial and viral, invade our water supplies from inadequate collection and treatment of sewage.

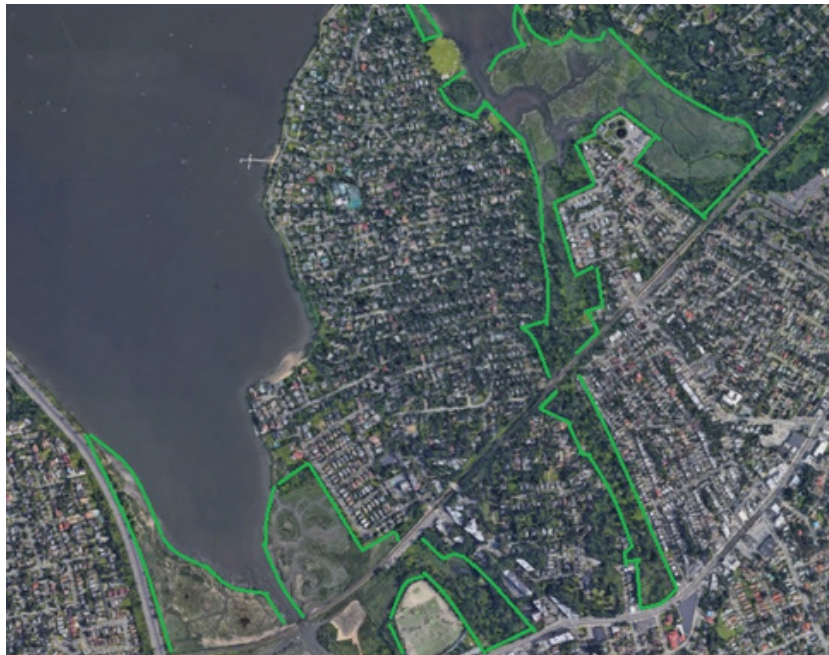
Beginning around 1970, public opinion surged in support of environmental reforms and powered the Environmental Decade (1/1/1970–12/11/1980). During this remarkable era, with bipartisan support, a body of legislation was created that “fundamentally changed the way America did business.” The nine major laws passed included the National Environmental Policy Act (1/1/1970), the Clean Air Act (12/31/1970), the Clean Water Act (10/18/1972), and the Toxic Substances Control Act (10/11/1976).

Federal action spurred local state, city, and community measures for the preservation and improvement of the environment. In northeastern Queens, for example, laws aimed at the preservation of fresh and tidal wetlands helped residents of Douglaston and Little Neck, led by Aurora Gareiss, resist the development that would have destroyed the open, natural areas that grace our neighborhood. More recently, construction of the five-million-gallon combined sewage tank buried beneath the field north of APEC—designed to help meet water quality standards-- has reduced the amount of pathogens released into Little Neck Bay during rainfall events.

Joining the fight to preserve our local wetlands, woods and shoreline, the Udalls Cove Preservation Committee has held annual community cleanups since the first Earth Day in 1970. Walter Mugdan has been active with the group since 1976, and has served as its president since 2002.

Astonishing progress has been made across the nation in the last fifty years. Among other achievements, the six most common air pollutants have decreased by 77%, even as the economy soared 285%; enormous improvements have been made in sewage treatment, drinking water, and surface water quality; and children’s blood lead levels are down 95%. Yet environmental threats remain as new contaminants appear and older ones continue to wreak harm. Crowning these is the king of environmental threats: global climate change which threatens our coastline with rising sea levels and more frequent intense storms. But as has occurred in the last fifty years, given broad public support and political will, we can ensure that progress will be made in the protection of the environment with its massive benefits for human health and well-being.

—Margaret L. King



The green line encircles the wetlands of the Douglaston/Little Neck region, preserved by community efforts.

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LITTLE NECK, *continued*



6

Further west at 253-17 Northern Boulevard stands the only three-story building in the immediate vicinity (Photo 6). Note the elegant, curving Classical-style brackets supporting a bay window that projects over the sidewalk, which was originally an open balcony. (Photo 7). A sign attached to the bottom of the bay window advertises the Greek Islands restaurant at the first floor. Unlike the more decorative rooflines of the two-story buildings further east and across the street, simple colored diamond and rectangular colored tiles accent a flat cornice. Today the tilework survives, although some of the tiles have been painted over.



7



8

Several blocks further west, before the corner of Browvale Lane, sits a handsome row of stores that terminates at 252-02 Northern Boulevard (Photo 8), home of the Benjamin Moore paint shop. Each of the four lower buildings includes a flat topped cornice accented with scrolls and a bold heraldic shield. An intricately detailed horizontal band above the windows includes Classical Greek motifs of acanthus leaves and roping.

Although awnings hide most of it, there is a brief glimpse at Pari's Threading Salon (252-06 Northern Boulevard) of a Greek key design just above the storefronts. Note that the terra cotta façade at the taller Benjamin Moore store wraps the corner and ends. From there, the façade becomes all brick facing Browvale Lane, limiting the more costly terra cotta decoration to the more important Northern Boulevard façade. The level of thought by the architect that went into designing the façades of this building—including the careful detailing of the brick façade facing Browvale Lane—indicates the pride in ownership of the original owner who commissioned this building. It is a pride evident in all the terra cotta flourishes that adorn the storefronts on Little Neck's Northern Boulevard.

—Peter Reinharz

**DOUGLASTON AND LITTLE NECK
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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**1979 AERIAL PHOTO OF DOUGLASTON-LITTLE NECK PENINSULA,
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