



Entrance To Jamaica Estates 1909

The glaciers that covered much of Queens and Long Island over a million years ago helped to form the hilly terrain characteristic of Jamaica Estates. As the Ice Age receded, rolling hills and valleys formed, punctuated with boulders and rocks deposited from areas further north. Over time, abundant rainfall and rich soil created a dense hardwood forest. The area's first inhabitants were Native Americans, including the Yemacahs, for whom Jamaica is named, and the Man-a-hattans who sold Jamaica Town to the Dutch. Dutch settlers were joined by English colonials, and diverse and independent US citizens followed from 1776 to modern times.

In the early part of this century, the city fathers considered two naturally beautiful areas for a park. One proposed site included our community. The second, the area to the West now known as Forest Park, was the site chosen, freeing the Jamaica Estates area to be developed according to another vision. In 1904, three men - Timothy L. Woodruff, former Lieutenant Governor of New York, Edward Groat, one time State Comptroller, and Michael Degnon, a pioneer in the engineering of our subway system, purchased 503 acres thickly wooded with oak, maple, elm and chestnut trees from the City of New York, with the intent of transforming this park-like setting into a residential community resembling Tuxedo Park in Orange County. They named the area after their firm, the Jamaica Estates Company, located at 353 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan. The boundaries were as they are now: Utopia Parkway/Homelawn Street on the West; Hillside Avenue on the South; Holliswood/188th Street on the East; Union Turnpike on the North.

Strict building requirements were set by the Jamaica Estates Company specifying that only detached one-family homes two stories high, with an attic, could be built on a minimum of 2 lots to a purchaser. No house exclusive of land was to cost less than \$6,000 and in certain sections, \$10,000 was set as a minimum price.



the degnon home

Many prominent people of the day, including Mr. Degnon and Mr. Woodruff, built magnificent homes in the Estates. The Degnon home crested a hill bounded by Midland Parkway, Dalny Road, Edgerton Boulevard and Wexford Terrace. It was later replaced by the Passionist Order of the Catholic Church whose first mass was celebrated in 1924 in the Degnon home. The Woodruff property, built on the northeast corner of Midland Parkway and Wexford Terrace, was, after being owned by various residents, torn down and replaced by an apartment building. Other original homes pictured here have been removed as well, but many were replaced by equally stately dwellings, maintaining the residential character originally envisioned.



Looking West on wexford terrace from Midland Pkwy, the degnon home

The Jamaica Estates Company's original brochure, from which many of these pictures are taken, was designed to show what kind of development the company's "residential park" was destined to become. With only some of its dreams realized, the company declared itself bankrupt in the

early 1920's. There were approximately 275 homes in the Estates at that time. The owners, who had purchased their properties under restrictive covenants, found that these covenants would expire on December 31, 1929. Eager to protect the character of their community, the residents met to form the Jamaica Estates Association, Inc.

The first order of business for the newly formed Association was assuring single-family zoning for a large portion of Jamaica Estates. In 1938, for the first time in the history of the City of New York, a regulation was established that would limit residential areas to detached single family homes. This regulation came into being from the efforts of the Jamaica Estates Association and the Riverdale community in the Bronx. To this day, thanks to the continuing efforts of the Association's directors and involved members, Jamaica Estates continues to have primarily R-1 zoning and our community does resemble a residential park.

Over the years many challenges have threatened the serenity of our carefully carved-out community. For example, the Grand Central Parkway - formerly Doncaster Boulevard - first proposed in 1929 by the City of New York, was to have no landscaping and both sides were to be rezoned for business.

Homes within 1000 feet of either side of the parkway were accessed to help pay for the cost of the parkway. This was during the Great Depression and a time of economic strain for many residents. In the fall of 1933 the parkway was opened to traffic. In 1934 the Jamaica Estates Association joined with other community groups to form the Grand Central Parkway Assessment Protest Committee. Through the efforts of these groups and their volunteer counsel, the Grand Central Parkway was declared an arterial highway with the cost for construction and land acquisition to be borne by the state and the city at large. Both sides of the parkway were rezoned to make businesses there impractical.



Grand Central Parkway

In the 40's, the Association had the temporary use of a large Jamaica Estates home as a community center. Located at 84-01 Midland Parkway, this was the property of Harry Sirkin who had moved to Florida to build hotels and condominiums. When World War II broke out, this house became the headquarters of the Air Raid Warden Service for the community. Throughout the war years, the Association made use of the house for its meetings, and keeping track of the many individuals who had entered the various branches of the armed forces. An ornate honor roll with 249 names was erected on the grounds of the Sirkin property. As the war continued, gold stars were placed next to some of these names; eventually there were 10 gold stars.

Until 1950, annual services were held on the Sirkin lawn to honor those 10 gold star World War II Jamaica Estates residents who died in the service of their country. At that time the Association erected a permanent war memorial in the Gatehouse on the Midland Parkway mall. A bronze plaque with the 10 names was put in place and a 35-foot flagpole was added in front of the Gatehouse. Every year since 1950, Memorial Day ceremonies are held at the gatehouse to honor the brave men and women from Jamaica Estates who have served and died in military service.

In the post World War II era, Jamaica Estates was well known for its many fine homes. Because of its beauty and prestige, other areas sought to use its name to attract buyers. As a result, land north of Union Turnpike purchased by developers, was called Jamaica Estates. The Jamaica Estates Association filed a plea with the District Attorney of Queens County. It was determined that a narrow strip of land located about 10 feet north of Union Turnpike was actually in the filed map of Jamaica Estates. This allowed a compromise permitting that area to be advertised as Jamaica Estates North.

Other changes have left their mark on the community. The Grand Central Parkway was widened from four to six lanes, and straightened between Homelawn and Avon streets. This new construction involved the condemnation of ten homes on the eastbound Grand Central Parkway service road - five on either side of Midland Parkway - together with six other properties. Riding stables once on Hillside Avenue and on Union Turnpike were replaced by other businesses.

As the membership rolls increased, yearly parties gave way to scheduled meetings and social events, carrying on the well-established tradition of friends and neighbors meeting with elected officials to discuss the needs of the community and for entertainment and celebration. The annual International Night event, featuring foods donated by our local merchants and entertainment by many different ethnic groups and individuals celebrates the diversity that is today's Jamaica Estates.

In 2008, marking the centennial of the building of the gatehouse at Midland Parkway and Hillside Avenue, the historic gatehouse was restored to its original design. The restoration included a new tile roof, removal of decades of old paint on the wooden beams and Jamaica Estates sign, cleaning of all stonework, ironwork and memorial plaque and all new lighting systems for the gatehouse and flagpole.

This project was part of a major beautification of the entire length of the Midland Malls as well as the traffic islands at Midland Parkway and Surrey Place. The new landscaping included hundreds of trees, ornamentals, shrubbery and perennials.

Never before in the history of Jamaica Estates had such a major investment been made to restore the fundamental beauty of the neighborhood. The entire effort was funded by a generous allocation of \$ 787,000.00 by City Council Member James F. Gennaro.



Jamaica estates gatehouse

A 128 page book documenting the unique history of Jamaica Estates from its picturesque rural beginnings to the vibrant multi cultural neighborhood of today is available from Arcadia Publishing at their books page on web site: [click here](#). The material for the book, created by The Aquinas Honor Society of The Immaculate Conception School, captures the lost history of the community. Places, events, and noteworthy people are brought to life once more through more than 200 vintage photographs.

Jamaica Estates Historical Plaque Dedication

A cast bronze plaque was unveiled April 23, 2010 on the Midland Mall, by students of The Aquinas Honor Society of the Immaculate Conception School and by Senator Frank Padavan who provided the funds for the creation of the permanent marker.

Maintaining the character of the Jamaica Estates community has not been an easy task, but it is a valued and rewarding commitment met by the Jamaica Estates Association, it's officers, committee chairpersons and involved residents. Working together with local elected officials, our unstinting efforts have made all the difference when we compare our community to other areas. We hope that all residents will participate in our mission to protect zoning, abate crime, promote education and leadership, and provide for the social interests of all neighbors in the Jamaica Estates community.