

# A History of Thomaston

By Susan Hirschhorn, Village Historian\*

Thomaston's southern border on Northern Boulevard gives its residents easy access to other communities. Even back in 1910 Thomaston residents benefited from this proximity, because an electrified trolley line travelled along Northern Boulevard then known as North Hempstead and Flushing Turnpike. From 1910 to 1920, a peninsula resident could travel west from Great Neck all the way to Flushing and east to Roslyn on a trolley lines run by the Mineola Roslyn and Port Washington Traction Company.

In the midst of modern improvements like trolley cars, and sophisticated developments like Great Neck Hills, many rural practices continued. An archive photograph of Susquehanna Avenue taken in 1910 shows new houses facing an unpaved street and open fields behind. Chickens were raised behind the Doncourt grocery store situated on the Turnpike, and fresh eggs and chickens were peddled by horse and cart through the Village from the Knickerbocker Ice Plant—situated at 777 Northern Blvd.



Susquehanna Ave. 1910

But another modern conveyance would soon intrude on the rural character of the Village—the railroad. While the single track line from Great Neck (sometimes called Thomaston Station on the schedule), was opened in 1898, it wasn't until 1910 that commuting to New York City became easier. A long planned railroad tunnel connecting Long Island to Manhattan was completed, eliminating the need for an East River ferry crossing. As “the suburbs” became a more desirable place to live, the agricultural character of the area began to fade. Communities like Great Neck Hills began to spring up in Thomaston, quickly followed by a seven-acre acquisition called Avalon, and later by development of Belgrave Square area.



First house in the Avalon development 1927

Incorporation of small villages was a trend in the building boom of the '20s when the need for zoning protection was becoming apparent.

Whatever the reasons, the creation of the Village was a remarkable accomplishment in an area with little historical identity, divided by a railroad track and a major road, and then served by three school districts, two water district, two fire districts and two park districts. In June 1931, the Great Neck Hills Protective Association met in the firehouse on Prospect Street to discuss incorporation of a village which

would include Great Neck Hills, Great Neck Villa, Belgrave Square, Russell Gardens, University Gardens, and the area between the railroad tracks and Kensington which had not been included in the recently incorporated Village of Great Neck Plaza. By the time the necessary petitions were prepared, Thomaston was to include Great Neck Hills, Great Neck Villa, Belgrave Square, and the area south of Kensington and east of 10<sup>th</sup> Street (Gilchrist Avenue). (The University Gardens area did not join in the plan, and Russell Gardens homeowners quickly carried out their own plans for incorporation as a separate village.) Filing of the petition was further delayed when it was discovered that the Village of Great Neck Plaza had made an application to annex the area now known as the Wyngate section of Great Neck Plaza.

There is no written explanation of the choice of the name of Thomaston for the new village. Originally, the name had applied to the area near the station. William R. Grace, who owned a large parcel of commercial property there, had named the area in honor of his wife's birthplace in Maine. When the station area incorporated in 1930 as Great Neck Plaza, the name Thomaston was available for the adjacent new village. The final step in the approval of the incorporation of the Village was a special election held September 17, 1931. Eighty residents voted for incorporation and 33 opposed it. The Village, which officially came into existence October 1, 1931 had an assessed valuation of \$3,498,410.00 and a population of 402.



Today, roughly 2,700 residents live along Thomaston's seven miles of streets, which once housed such luminaries as Groucho Marx, singer Helen Morgan and actress/ playwright Jane Cowl.

In 1981, we celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an incorporated village with an old fashioned jamboree and an art and artisans show. Several years earlier, to celebrate the Nation's Bicentennial, an informal village history was prepared. The booklet, called simply *Village of Thomaston*, is on file in the pamphlet section of the main Great Neck Library.

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\*This article appeared in the Great Neck History issue of the *Great Neck Record* in 1987. Photographs have been added to the text.