

Great Neck Historical Society honors couple for preserving historic home

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The Victorian Second-Empire-style house on Susquehanna. (Photo courtesy of the Great Neck Historical Society)

There is no question that people who buy homes built in the 1800s are an intrepid lot.

One element of buying a house is an emotional experience akin to falling in love and trusting that any defect in the loved one, be it house or person, can either be changed or accepted.

So when Shelby Hickey, photographer, and Luis Camnitzer, artist and art critic from Uruguay, saw a Victorian charmer on 124 Susquehanna Avenue in the Village of Thomaston, they were smitten with the craftsmanship and fine details of the house. Although Ms. Hickey's sister, a realtor, counseled them that it might well be a knockdown, the tug of the house's uniqueness and beauty overrode the objections.

And so it was with gratitude and appreciation that the Great Neck Historical Society awarded a Heritage Recognition Plaque to the couple who rescued the home from the wrecking ball. The house retains the original fireplace and marble mantelpieces in two rooms as well as much of the original wood flooring .

The society recognizes homes and buildings in the Great Neck community of unique architectural, cultural or historic interest. These structures are recognized for their building style, design or engineering method; their age; their association with a noteworthy person or event; or they are representative of changing patterns of growth and development in the community.

The Victorian Second Empire-style house with a wraparound porch and cupola was originally built for Benjamin Wood, editor and publisher of the *New York Daily News* (no relation to current *Daily News*) for forty years.

Because of his anti-Lincoln, pro-slavery views, and incitement of anti-draft riots, the federal government effectively shut down his paper in 1861 for a year and a half by suspending its delivery by the postal service. Wood was viewed as a traitor by many in the north from 1863 to 1865, when the paper was back in business. It was accused of printing letters from readers, purported to be southern spies, with coded messages for their southern brethren. Benjamin Wood was elected to the U.S. Congress as a Democrat, serving from 1861–1865 and again from 1881–1883. In between, from 1866–67, he was a New York State senator and author of a pro-secession novel.

Benjamin Wood's home originally faced Flushing North Hempstead Turnpike, which was renamed Northern Boulevard sometime around 1900. His extensive property included a twelve-sided stable and a round barn with arched windows, which provided ample room for Wood's famous July 4th parties, described in an article in *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* of July 1860. The magazine story emphasized the beautiful 60 acres of property and the popularity of Wood's annual event, which attracted thousands of guests and gave them a "few hours of uninterrupted enjoyment," including fireworks. The house retains the original fireplace and marble mantelpieces in two rooms.

In September 1869 a *New York Times* advertisement announced an auction of the property. About that time, Joseph Spinney bought four acres, where he subsequently built the Methodist Church on Northern Boulevard. Several times in the 1880s Spinney had advertisements in the *Brooklyn Eagle* announcing that the former home of Benjamin Wood was for rent, and then for sale. At an unknown date, most likely prior to 1900, the house was moved to its present location on Susquehanna Avenue.

According to Carlyle Shreeve Smith, a professor of archaeology who grew up in Great Neck and whose family owned property on Susquehanna Avenue since 1884, his great grandfather Thomas Shreeve bought a portion of the Wood property. Shreeve built houses nearby on Susquehanna in the 1880s using wood from some of the buildings associated with the Wood house. At one time, the widow's walk housed a doll house for the children.

The Heritage Recognition program should not be confused with "landmarking" a structure. The recognition program does not place any restrictions on the home or building owner. The Historical Society has recognized 16 houses and nine buildings including schools, apartments and village halls.

President Alice Kasten stated, "This is one of the most successful projects of the society, as there are so many noteworthy homes and buildings in Great Neck that deserve recognition. Joan Wheeler, who initiated the project, is doing a great job and welcomes applications for recognition."

For more information, visit the Great Neck Historical Society's website at www.greatneckhistorical.org and click on Recognition, call 516-288-6124, or visit the Great Neck Historical Society's Facebook page.