**Vignettes**

I

saac Hicks established a nursery along Jericho Turnpike in 1853. His son Edward invented and patented equipment that enabled them to transplant fully grown trees to the new Gold Coast estates.

Henry, Edward’s son, was a botanist. When the US Department of Agriculture sent exotic plants from Europe and Asia to the US, they were received only by the government site in Maryland, an arboretum in Boston and Henry Hicks in Westbury. Henry found that many shrubs and trees were suited to the Long Island.

At my house there are two Hicks yews—a cross between the Japanese and English tree—that Henry developed. The evergreens, which are toxic except for the fall red berries, are at least a half-century old and nearly thirty feet tall. Although the Hicks yew isn’t native to America, neither is it an invasive, but I wonder how many of the specimens introduced by Henry and first planted on the nearby estates are now the bane of gardeners.



**W**estbury once had two baseball fields close to the railroad station. One team was named the Westburys. Little is known about them. No one knows the name of the other team or even if existed. It would appear, though, that each field was used by two different teams.

The same year that the Westburys were formed, 1885, the Cuban Americans, the country’s first Nego baseball club, moved from Philadelphia to a summer resort hotel in Babylon. Did the Cuban American play against one of the Westbury clubs? Did the Westbury teams play against each other? Was one of Westbury’s teams white, the other Black or was there another reason for there being two teams here?

Baseball did bring a moment of fame to the village when Westbury’s Little League team won the Senior Division Baseball World Championship, in 1967. All but one player was white. Tommy Donahue, a member of the team, was drafted by the Angels a decade later and played baseball in Los Angeles as a catcher for two years. He returned to Westbury to join the family business as a mortician.



**L**ikely there would be more than 2,000 people in Durazzano today if much of the Italian village hadn’t left for Westbury beginning in the 1880s. Those who came established an enclave by St. Brigid Catholic Church, named for the second patron saint of Ireland. Irish and Italians could lay claim to the church’s namesake, as Italy also had its St. Brigid.

Where in Europe parishioners came from made no difference to the semi-secret anti-Catholic American Protective Society. Did those in the Westbury branch believe that the Vatican had set a date for a holy massacre, as alleged in one of its publications? Or did its members fear Catholic influence in local schools and elections?

The Protective Societies collapsed, in 1911. By then Italians were part of the defining character of Westbury and St. Brigid was the village’s dominant church.

 In 2003, Mayor Ernie Strada, whose family emigrated from Durazzano, symbolically joined Westbury and the little town in Italy as sister villages. Strada, mayor for twenty-eight years, died in 2020 and is buried in the cemetery adjacent to St. Brigid.



**H**enri Fournier, the French race car driver employed by William Vanderbilt, approached the railroad crossing at Westbury Station after leaving the tycoon at the Garden City Hotel. With buildings on either side of the tracks obscuring his view, Fournier couldn’t see the wildcat engine as it steamed down the railroad tracks. Perhaps he couldn’t hear it either because he ignored the crossing’s alarm bells. The engineer, however, spotted the car, blew the train’s whistle, and reversed the lever, but not enough to prevent a collision. The auto, valued at $9,000 and capable of going 60 mph, was twisted into pieces. The six men in the car were hospitalized with various injuries.

This 1910 accident was the first ever reported involving a car and a train. As a result of five more deaths over the next few years, a railroad bridge over Post Avenue was constructed.



**I**n my backyard I have found: a wagon wheel and a couple of foot-high white rocks in the shape of rounded gravestones. They may have been mile-markers on a road nearby, perhaps Jericho Turnpike before it became a state highway.

Or they may have been mileposts for the 1904 Vanderbilt Cup Race, the first international auto road race to be held in the United States. A temporary wooden grandstand was constructed on Jericho Turnpike to accommodate some of the thousands of spectators gathered to watch the French entry win the 300-mile circular race which started and finished at the corner of Cambridge Street, in Westbury.

The provenance of the wagon wheel is less conjectural. A Hicks family member told me that where I live once had been the Feltman Farm. The 45-acre piece of property was sold to developers in 1906. Did the farm belong to Charles Feltman, the German immigrant who invented the sausage placed in a bun—the hot dog—that sold for 10-cents at Coney Island?

I’ve put the mile-markers in the ivy and have hung the wagon wheel between two large flower poles next to my compost pit.



**T**wo years after a race car killed a spectator during the Vanderbilt Cup Race, William Vanderbilt, in 1908, constructed a roadway notable for several innovations: the first limited-access road in the world; the first roadway used exclusively by cars; the first in the country to use concrete as the roadbed; the first to use underpasses and bridges.

When New York began constructing its parkway system, some thought the Northern State should incorporate the existing Motor Parkway. Master builder Robert Moses thought otherwise, calling the Motor Parkway a “white elephant for the last twenty years.”

This may not have been the first elephant associated with the village. A friend told me that a neighbor had once shown him a colorized postcard of an elephant hauling material at a construction site on Jericho Turnpike and the elephant was housed on Livingston Street. Perhaps this was a stunt to attract attention to the Vanderbilt Cup auto races. Or maybe the story is fanciful.

What is certain is that Rocco Lanzilotta rode the Elephant to kindergarten. The designated school bus, with the animal pictured on the side, took him from his Breezy Hill house—where his mother cooked seven fishes for the Italian American feast on Christmas Eve—to the Grand Street School.

Rocco was amongst the first group of children to be bused after the district did away with neighborhood schools to create a racially integrated system: pre-school and kindergarten classes in New Cassel, grades 1-4 in village schools, grades 5-6 in New Cassel, junior high school in the village and high school in Old Westbury. This plan was opposed by the white members of the Neighborhood Schools Association, which led to school budget defeats in 1969 and 1970 with the hope that funds for busing would be eliminated. They weren’t.



**A** plumber’s shop, hardware store, cobbler, clothier, and bakery with an oven in the cellar stood next to each other on Post Avenue in 1910. There also was a Chinese laundry.

Where the laundry once had been there is now a Chinese take-out restaurant.



**T**he village once hosted the Westbury Whippet Association. The NY Tribune on Oct. 15, 1922, reported that “Skipper, sporting red silks, established a new world’s record for whippets on the grass course of Mr. John S. Phipps’s polo field at Westbury, L. I.” Two day later, the NY Herald noted that “a large gallery watched the races at the at the estate of Mr. And Mrs. John S. Phipps on the Jericho Turnpike at Westbury.”

The next year Westbury hosted the first specialty show for whippets. However, the Westbury association was short-lived. Where the races and show had been held is now Old Westbury Gardens. The estate house can be seen across the turnpike from Hicks Nursery.



**G**randees stood their ground against the plan of Robert Moses and Gov. Al Smith to build the Northern State Parkway through their verdant, sprawling and opulent Old Westbury estates. The power of money successfully bent political power to its will, so when the highway was built in 1925, it made a two-mile detour south before continuing east to Suffolk County, thereby keeping the tycoons’ summer houses and parklands intact by shifting the burden onto the less prosperous inhabitants of Westbury.

When the state wanted to widen highway through the Westbury section in the mid-1980s, Ernie Strada, the village mayor, resisted the plan. Fellow Republicans, construction unions, a powerful business association, and Governor Mario Cuomo put great pressure on him to relent, but the mayor wanted to protect the village’s air quality and ground water. The state’s highest court sided with the village. Road widening was reduced from four lanes to three, sound walls were built and existing bridges over the parkway all remained.

Strada won re-election after re-election, serving for a total of 28 years as mayor.



**A** bit of aviation history came to Westbury by way of the Bolshevik Revolution and three defectors.

As second in command of the air division of the Russian army, Victor Otgoff flew seaplanes during WWI to become the first Russian naval wartime pilot. With the toppling of imperial rule, he was appointed a Russian attaché in Washington, then defected to the US when the Bolshevik’s seized power. He moved to Long Island to run a chicken farm to be near the airfield complex of military and civilian airfields in Westbury, south of Old Country Rd.

Igor Sikorsky, a friend of Otgoff, chose to join him on Long Island. In Russia, Sikorsky had designed the world’s first four-engine aircraft, then lost his considerable wealth after the Bolsheviks nationalized a factory in which he had invested. With his family in tow, Sikorski emigrated to America and moved in with his former-pilot friend. He scavenged in junkyards and piece by piece built a plane beside Otgoff’s chicken shed.

Cold weather and lack of money stopped work on the twin-engine, closed cabin, 14-passenger plane. Whatever funds he had went to buying food for himself and his assistants, also refugees from the Soviet Union.

One Sunday a chauffeur-driven car pulled up to the Otgoff’s farm.

“I’m looking for Mr. Sikorski,” the said Sergei Rachmaninoff, the composer and performer who had left Russia penniless but had quickly established a successful career touring as a concert pianist after receiving generous stipends, advances and loans from emigres.

Rachmaninoff spent more than an hour at Otgoff’s farm. Before leaving, we wrote a check to Sikorski for $5,000.

“Pay me back whenever you can,” the visitor said.

Sikorsky moved the partially completed plane from the farm to a wooden hangar on the edge of the airfield, close to the Westbury railroad station. He also moved his family into a rented house on Butler Street.

Sikorski invited Rachmaninoff to be the company’s vice-president. With Sikorski’s genius and determination combined with Rachmaninoff’s prestige, the enterprise succeeded. Over the next decades, Sikorksy’s venture created amphibians that flew to Central and South America, the first viable helicopter, and the Flying Clipper that crossed both oceans. In 1929, he repaid Rachmaninoff the $5,000, plus interest.

Emigres who worked in the factory settled around the area. By 1947, there was a Ukrainian church in New Cassel, on Prospect Avenue.



**V**iola Gentry and Jack Ashcraft took off from Roosevelt Field hoping to set a flight endurance record by flying for at least 174 hours. The announcement of their 1929 attempt was scandalous to some, as the two, who weren’t married, planned on spending many hours together in a tight space.

 “I read letters from people who wanted to know how in the world a man and a woman could stay up in an airplane all by themselves, day after day with no privacy,” Gentry said. She explained that they would place a plywood board against the wall of the cabin whenever one went to sleep or used the toilet.

The two were seasoned pilots. Ashcraft had barnstormed for the Gates Flying Circus, attracting crowds in the tens of thousands around the country. Gentry, a stunt pilot, once landed her plane on the roof of the Grand Hotel in San Francisco.

Gentry and Ashcraft left with a ham sandwich, lettuce and tomato sandwich, water, coffee and oranges. Food and additional fuel would be delivered to them daily by another plane as they continued to fly The Answer around the New York area as long as they were able.

That night a heavy fog settled over Nassau. Ten hours into their flight the ground disappeared from under them. Gentry, familiar with Long Island weather, wanted to land, certain the refueling plane wouldn’t be able to find them before they ran out of fuel. Ashcraft was sure they would be OK and took over when Gentry’s two hours at the controls were up. She climbed in the rear seat and put up the wooden partition. Ashcraft assured her that he would be able to land in one of the potato fields if necessary. At six that morning, they ran out of gasoline.

“Fasten your seatbelt and hold on,” he told Gentry.

Ashcraft couldn’t find an open field. The Answer crashed into Hicks Nursery.

“I was just waking up,” Henry Hicks said, “when I heard a noise as if an automobile or something had crashed. I got up an looked out of the window but couldn’t see anything because there was a heavy mist over the ground. I had felt the ground shake slightly, though, so I called my sons, and together we went out to look around. About 300 feet from the house I saw what at first looked like a big tree was bent but not broken off. As I walked closer, I saw that it was an airplane.”

Hicks and his sons pulled Gentry from the wreckage. She spent several months at Nassau Hospital, then about a year recuperating hospital in Manhattan, suffering from a fractured skull and crushed shoulders. Ashcraft died on the spot.



At Hick’s house (Queensborough Public Library Archives)

Several hours later, a military plane from Mitchel Field took off, caught fire over Westbury and crashed into a line of maple trees not more than a mile from the first crash. The mechanic onboard died at Nassau Hospital.

In 1935, another plane crashed in Westbury. The NY Times reported:

While attempting a right tail spin, a difficult aerial manoeuvre reserved for experts, Miss Freidel Braun, 28-years old, of 124 West Eighty-fifth Street, New York, lost control of a Fairchild monoplane this afternoon and crashed into the roof of a house on Concord Street.

Miss Braun was killed instantly, and a passenger was seriously injured.
The passenger, Warren C. Boles,
25, of 151 East Thirty-eighth Street, New York, was taken to the Nassau Hospital suffering from a brain concussion and a fractured left thigh. Hospital attaches said he told them he was an ensign in the United States Navy.

The plane circled around Westbury for fifteen minutes and successfully made five tail spins to the left and then straightened out for the next stunt. The pilot swung her craft into a right spin and from that point never regained control.

The craft spun swiftly toward the earth, struck one side of the roof of a twelve-room house owned by Richard Martorelli at Concord Street and plunged twenty feet further to the ground.

Mrs. Martorelli, who was in the
house with two friends and her
maid when the plane struck, said she ran out after hearing the crash and saw that the ship had glanced off the roof and dropped, wrecked, at the side of the house.

Less than a half mile away from the scene of the crash, two other fliers were injured earlier in the afternoon when they were compelled to make a forced landing in a field in Carle Place, an adjoining hamlet.



**T**he Feast of the Assumption, which has taken place in Westbury each August since 1910, honors the heritage and religious tradition established by the village’s Italian immigrants. A statue of the Blessed Mother standing in a bed of white and blue flowers is carried on a palanquin from St. Brigid through the village streets to the Catholic elementary school several blocks away, the faithful praying and pinning money to the statue along the way, followed by days of carnival rides, sausage and onion sandwiches, and fireworks.



**T**he Brooklyn Daily Eagle ran this article in 1937—

Westbury, July 19—Construction work on a Hebrew Centre will begin here in the Fall, it was announced yesterday at an open air meeting conducted by the Moorish Palestine Talmud Torah of Brooklyn.

The meeting was in charge of Rabbi Hekekiah Jacob of Brooklyn who said that the organization is composed of Negroes who have embraced the Jewish faith. It was held on property donated by Aaron Jacob who lives nearby. The site of the proposed center is on Maple Ave. near School St.

“We believe that all Jews should be united, no matter what their color. The Catholics are united and so are the Protestants, so why not all Jews. Our building will be open to any Jew at all times,” Rabbi Jacob said.

The meeting was also addressed by Mordecai Jacob. A sum of money was raised toward the building fund for the proposed center.

A quarter century later, the synagogue still hadn’t been built. The Wisconsin Jewish Chronical 1962—

Westbury, N Y. —(WNS) —The first Negro Jewish Center in the United States will be established in this Long Island village, according to Rabbi Hezekiah Jacob, director of the Moorish Palestine Talmud Torah of Brooklyn. The center will be for Negroes who have converted to Judaism.

No record of the Negro Jewish Center can be found in the Westbury historical archives. And neither is Aaron Jacob mentioned amongst those owning property near the intersection before or after 1937.



**J**. George Frederick and Joyce Jean’s 1939 Long Island Seafood Cook Book doesn’t specify which restaurant this recipe is from.





**S**oon after returning from the Peace Corps Lyn began to work at Tri-Cap, the local anti-poverty program, located on Union Avenue. She had been hired as a community developer to assist the elderly in Carle Place, an adjacent all-white hamlet. Lyn was Tri-Caps only white employee.

One day, a young man finished his business in the office and said he needed a lift to the train station. Lyn volunteered. He made it clear that he would prefer to have someone else take him but relented when there were no other offers.

In the car, Lyn asked him what he did. He said that he worked at the Martin Luther King Center.

“What do you do there?”

“I teach Swahili,” he said with a swagger.

“*Habari yako*?” ‘How are you?’ Lyn had asked, thrilled to speak the language she used in Kenya. The passenger said no more as she tried to continue to engage. By the time they reached the station, it was clear that he didn’t understand the language.

He got out, leaned into her rolled down window and said, “Why Swahili?” and walked away.

She never saw him again.



**S**am Tear and Jules Gershon sold newspapers, magazines, candy and other sundry items in their eponymous Post Avenue stationery store. Notably, the establishment had two walnut telephone booths against the wall near the rear. The booths had folding doors, for privacy, and two long windows, so the caller sitting in the booth could look out while speaking, a useful thing for one of the regular patrons.

Peter, Jules’ son, recalls that “the phone booths were occasionally used by, among others, a local bookie named ‘Bits’ Catapano who was once arrested in the parking lot in back of the store when he saw, from his perch inside phone booth #1, several cops coming in the front door looking right at him, and promptly fled through my dad’s office, right out the back door, only to run straight into the arms of several detectives who were patiently waiting for him to do just that.”

I can’t find another reference to Bits. Perhaps he worked for one of the Mafia families operating in New York, a reasonable supposition because in 1992, a news story about Aniello Migliore, who had been sentenced to twenty-five years for racketeering only to have the sentence overturned, broke nationwide. The Washington Post—

Westbury, NY April 4—A reputed top-ranking member of the Lucchese crime family was shot and critically wounded at a restaurant in what authorities called a bungled mob attack.

Authorities say Aniello Migliore allegedly ran the family briefly during the 1980s and is one of the most senior members of the Lucchese family.

He was sitting at a table by the front window of Tesoro's Restaurant in Westbury on New York's Long Island on Friday night when he was struck in the neck and upper body by a single shotgun blast.

The shot apparently came from a passing car, police said. No one else was injured, and no weapon was found.

When Tear and Gershon closed, in 1989, the phone booths disappeared, unlike the Westbury Grill, a 48-foot- long by 17-foot-wide metallic diner also on Post Avenue. The grill was moved to a junkyard in New Jersey, only to be resurrected to greater glory in Baltimore when it was the setting for the movie Diner. The grill’s peripatetic life not yet over, it went back to New Jersey only to be purchased by a radio station. The eatery returned to Baltimore, placed two blocks from city hall to be used as a restaurant training ground for vocational students. It didn’t survive the Covid pandemic.



**L**ife-sized Cephas stood in Gray’s Saddlery’s display window, on Post Avenue, a fine-looking animal fit for matches at the famed polo field not far away, the statuesque mare amidst hand-stitched saddles, personalized mallets and bridles made of English leather.

The Arabian, with glass eyes and removable ears and tail, was carved in the 1890s for Borden Condensed Milk Company so drivers could learn how to bridle horses to pull wagons filled with milk bottles.

Arriving in the saddlery during the Depression, stock-still dappled gray Cephas watched passersby on the street and greeted customers who patronized the saddlery. During winter months, when polo matches moved South and Roosevelt Raceway closed for the season, many worried about Cephas well-being and urged the saddlery’s owner to provide the noble horse with a blanket cover.

Each night, when the avenue darkened, Cephas would visit the paddocks at Erchliss, the Howard Phipps estate adjacent to the Westbury High School, lonely as he was, rejuvenated the next morning for another turn at his sentinel’s perch.

When the saddlery moved to Florida, Cephas was put to pasture at the Guggenheim estate on the North Shore. One day he was gone. Every now, under a moonlit sky, the figure of a gray horse can be seen by peering through the fence next to the high school track.



**A** blue house faces a gray house on my street. The blue house is owned by a family of four, the gray is occupied by many adults and children. The blue house has two passenger cars, one in the driveway and the other in the street. The gray house has an assortment of cars, pickup trucks, vans and SUVs. The two cars follow a Monday through Friday white-collar schedule while vehicles come and go at all hours at the gray house.

 The blue house had once been owned by a dapper man with a heavy accent who worked at the Italian consulate in Manhattan, the gray house was once owned by a petty gambler.

On Sunday mornings the blue house becomes a chapel; on Thursday nights the gray house becomes a tabernacle. Services at the blue house are in English and hymns sung are steady and sedate. In the gray house tambourines and Spanish songs fill the night air as many congregants spill out into the street.



**O**n one side of the street is a squat house that was the stable for horses owned by the occupants of the grand house on the other side of Center Street.

Many years ago, Lyn and I attended parties in the ballroom of the large house. The parties were hosted by an American folk singer and her British husband. Amongst the guests was a modern dancer who smoked a lot; a sardonic would-be playwright who taught at a community college; a research biologist who had attended a specialized music high school; a doctor who played the accordion; a budding civic leader who elevated Irish cooking to an art.

These were some of the people who formed the Greater Westbury Arts Council, bringing dance and music classes to the basement of the library. The council coined the slogan still used by the village: Westbury—A Community for All Seasons.

A surgeon who specializes in facial reconstruction later moved into the converted stable. He once restored the nose of boy from the Marshall Island using 3-D bioprinting technology that he had developed. I met my neighbor at an outdoor concert in Westbury’s downtown plaza, an event sponsored by Westbury Arts, the incarnation of the original organization.



**A**bandoned and unidentified infants—stillborn, forsaken or victims of infanticide—are buried in a section of Holy Rood Cemetery. Each child is placed in a 10- by 30-inch coffin and given a burial by the Children of Hope Foundation. Destiny. Charles, Agnes, Nicholas and more than one hundred twenty others have their names inscribed on bronze plaques with the same surname, Hope. Cloth bunnies, teddy bears, toy cars and flowers are often left at the gravesite.



**M**ichael Boyle and David Arce were best of friends since junior high. As adults, they had worked in the same firehouse on Great Jones Street, in Manhattan. They raced down from the 40th floor together and were in the lobby of the north tower when it collapsed on 9/11. Their remains were identified several weeks later and buried yards apart in Holy Rood Cemetery.

David Fontana, another classmate from Westbury, also became a firefighter. He died in the same building that morning, on the day of his 8th wedding anniversary. His last known location was on the 45th floor.

The three are amongst the five hundred fourteen Long Islanders who died that morning, their names inscribed on a monument in the cemetery. Thomas Strada is one of nine from Westbury. He was at his desk on the 104th floor when the plane hit. His remains were never found. Two weeks later, his father, Ernie Strada, Westbury’s mayor, collected ashes from the rubble, put them in an urn and, after a memorial mass at St. Brigid, interred them in the family plot in Holy Rood.



**P**arishioners fill the pews at the modest Ave Maria Chapel; many kneel on the steps outside listening to mass being conducted in Latin. This is the world headquarters of the Catholic Traditionalist Movement, formed in 1965 to protest the Vatican’s social and liturgical changes that mandated that mass be said in the vernacular. The chapel attracts those who otherwise would attend St. Brigid Church a few blocks away, where the liturgy is in English, Italian, Spanish, Haitian Creole but not Latin.



**T**he water district had noticed that an unusually large amount of water was being used at residence. After several notices sent to the owner explaining that there may a leak, an inspector went to deliver the message in person. The garage happened to be opened revealing hundreds of bottles labeled Westbury Water. The business was shut down.



**A** three-story house on Winthrop Street was built for the Westbury school district’s teachers at the turn of the 20th century when teachers were single women. Sometime in the 1970s it became the home of an Indonesia husband and American wife who owned a gallery specializing in Asian art—their home filled with it. The next owners, a Portuguese family, rented out the two top floors to Chinese college students, Turks who worked in the local Mediterranean restaurant and an African family granted asylum after fleeing from their country.



**A** black rooster strutted across my neighbor's lawn. A few days later I saw the bird again, this time on Brush Hollow Road, indifferent to passing cars and thunderous trucks. I didn’t know who kept the bold bird, but it was someone nearby, as I heard it every morning for several weeks.

Then the rooster went quiet. Maybe it had been groomed for an illegal cockfight and lost. Or perhaps it had met its fate as a sacrifice in a Voodoo ritual. Or it simply may have wound up in a large soup pot.