Summer Cool in Bloomingdale

We’re well into the summer season in Bloomingdale and we’ve noted a choice of “cool” things to do in this edition of Bloomingdale Bulletin. Stop by the beautiful Firemen’s Memorial with its fountain at Riverside Drive and 100th Street. Or pay a visit to Tanner’s spring in Central Park, once you read the odd story of the person it’s named after. Then check out how the quaint custom of crushing straw hats at the end of the summer season turned into a hooligan riot in The Straw Hat Rebellion of 1922. We look forward to feedback, comments, and ideas here. We hope you enjoy it all and will choose to support us with a donation.

Upcoming Programs

Free Walking Tours
Jim Mackin
Wednesday, July 17, 6:00 pm
Wednesday, September, 6:00 pm
Free. No reservation needed. Meet at the south end of Straus Park, Broadway and 106th Street

Jim Mackin
Jim Mackin, local historian and author of Notable New Yorkers of Manhattan’s Upper West Side, has scheduled his popular walking tours for the summer. You’ll be treated to highlights of the neighborhood and hear stories about the colorful people who have lived here. Tours vary from one to the next, and last between one and two hours. Jim is also the founder of Weekday Walks, which offers tours on select Wednesdays, covering a different part of the city each time.
The Sullivanians
Alexander Stille
Wednesday, September 25, 6:00 pm

It was a secretive cult embedded in the Upper West Side, full of mystery and intrigue. Alexander Stille spills the tea in his book, *The Sullivanians: Sex, Psychotherapy, and the Wild Life of an American Commune*. In this presentation, he will reveal details about the lives of the group’s founders, leaders, and followers, who included such bold-faced names as Jackson Pollock, the art critic Clement Greenberg, Judy Collins, and the dancer Lucinda Childs.

The Sullivan Institute was founded in the 1950s. By the ‘60s, it had evolved into an urban commune of 300 to 400 people who were leading creative, polyamorous lives. Many of the members lived in a one-time school building on West 91st Street. By the mid-’70s, the group had become an insular cult in which therapists controlled virtually every aspect of their lives.

Stille is a well-known journalist, professor of International Journalism at Columbia University, and Upper Westsider. He interviewed more than 60 former patients of the Institute and their family members to gather material for his fascinating, nuanced account of the complexities of life in the Sullivanian orbit.

This will be a free presentation both in person and on Zoom. Check here in September for location details and for the link.

The Strauses in Bloomingdale: The Story Behind the Upper West Side Home and the Memorial Honoring New York’s Legendary Merchant Family
Joan Adler, Straus Historical Society, and Rob Garber, BNHG
Thursday, October 17, 6:00 pm

Straus Park at Broadway and West 106th Street is one of Manhattan’s cherished small greenspaces. Learn how it came to grace the Bloomingdale neighborhood, as well as the story of the tightly-knit Straus family, whose name is forever connected to Macy’s — New York’s greatest emporium — and to the legendary sinking of the Titanic.
Joan Adler is Executive Secretary of the Straus Historical Society. Rob Garber is a neighborhood historian, member of BNHG, and longtime Bloomingdale resident.

This will be a free Zoom presentation. Check here for the link.

Past Programs

When Squatting Became Homesteading: Urban Renewal and Sweat Equity in Manhattan Valley
Jennifer Maya Luz Pliego
Co-sponsored by BNHG, Hostelling International USA, and the Columbus Amsterdam BID

This presentation gave us an engrossing look into the sweat-equity movement of the 1970s. Low-income families were trained to demolish and renovate abandoned buildings in Manhattan Valley, then became shareholders of their own homes in the newly renovated buildings. How their story evolved is an example of community engagement at its best. Jennifer Maya Luz Pliego is the creator of the portrait photo exhibition, Good Neighbors, at the Anibal Aviles Playground, 111 West 108th Street. She is part of the leadership group of El Taller Latino Americano, a noteworthy arts, language, and education organization in its 45th year of service to New Yorkers.

You can see a recording of the program on our website.

Before Central Park
Sara Cedar Miller

Sara Cedar Miller was Central Park Conservancy photographer since 1984, its historian from 1989 to 2017, and historian emerita since 2017. Her deep knowledge of the history of the park and the land it occupies was on shimmering display at this richly varied presentation of the area over two and a half centuries before it became a park. She told us about the topography of the land, the farms, businesses, churches, burial grounds, homes, and communities of New Yorkers on this land, as well
as wars and reservoirs, and how the city acquired the land to make the park. You can see a recording of the program on our [website](#).

**Voices of the Stones: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Unfinished Tower of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine**  
Robert F. Rodriguez  
Co-sponsored by BNHG and the Columbus Amsterdam BID

Forty years ago, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine began a major, but never-completed, project to build its towers. A nice outcome is that the partially built south tower houses an array of exquisite stone sculptures, not readily visible from street level.

Photojournalist Robert F. Rodriguez spent more than 10 years as artist-in-residence at the Cathedral, documenting the work. He presented a series of never-before-seen photographs that give a close-up look at the intricate, and often humorous, carvings, as well as the stone carvers who created them. Rodriguez writes [blogs](#) about the Cathedral’s architecture. He was also the photographer for *Heaven on the Hudson: Mansions, Monuments, and Marvels of Riverside Park* and *Fabulous Fountains of New York*, both written by BNHG’s Stephanie Azzarone.

You can see a recording of the program on our [website](#).

**Bloomingdale Bites**

A joint Initiative, sponsored by The Columbus-Amsterdam BID and Bloomingdale Restaurants, with support from BNHG, The West 102/103 Block Association, The West 104th Street Block Association, and Hostelling International.

This food-tasting evening extravaganza, held in the gracious ballroom of Hostelling International, celebrated the diverse, rich culinary scene of Bloomingdale. It featured restaurant fare from an array of eateries across the neighborhood. Restaurants included: Amity Hall Uptown, Bosino Brick Oven
Pizza, The Calaveras Corner, Dive 106, Elis Wine Bar, Lion's Head Tavern, Miss Mamie's Spoonbread, Noche Mexicana, Ortomare, Roti Roll, and Zaad.

In between tasty morsels from the varied cuisines, BNHG’s Gil Tauber and Angel Roman made three presentations tracing the rich gastronomic history of the Bloomingdale neighborhood. The first, titled City Taverns and Country Inns, covered the decades from the colonial period through the 1850s. This was a time of farms and posh country estates. Some older houses that had become country inns were destinations for outings from “the city.”

The second presentation, New People, New Tables, took us to the major construction projects of the 1840s, including the Croton Aqueduct, the Hudson River Railroad and, later, Central Park – all of which brought many new people into the area, including many German and Irish immigrants. We heard the stories of the Lion Brewery, the opening of the Ninth Avenue El, the bicycle craze of the 1890s, and the sad demise of the venerable Claremont Hotel.

Finally, we visited the Golden Age and Its Aftermath. This began with the construction of the IRT subway, which sparked a massive building boom and turned our stretch of Broadway into a lively entertainment and nightlife district, including numerous theaters, restaurants, and hotels. Cut short by Prohibition, this period was superseded by the flowering of budget restaurant chains through the Depression and Post War period. Following the City’s economic nadir in the 1960s and ’70s, the late 20th century brought the appearance of new ethnic cuisines, in part an effect of 1965 changes in US immigration laws.

You can read about this history in blog posts on our website
New in the Neighborhood

New Library Exhibit – The Bloomingdale Branch Library: Serving Our Community for 125 Years

A project by Rob Garber, BNHG member
On display at the Bloomingdale Library through July 31, 2024

This exhibit tells the story of the 1896 origin of Bloomingdale’s library, the New York Free Circulating Library, and its many decades in a beautiful but crowded building at 206 West 100th Street, west of its current home. It describes the tremendous impact the library had on the neighborhood.

See which books were being “lost” by patrons in the early 1900s (hint, you might see the words “indiscretion” and “love” in the titles).

Many notable events were hosted at the branch — including the remarkable 1977 “read-in” when Isaac Asimov and Betty Friedan protested deep cuts in Bloomingdale library hours during the city’s fiscal crisis. You’ll be surprised at the number of times this branch has been mentioned in books that were set or written in the neighborhood.

Coming next: The Hudson-Fulton Celebration of 1909, on display August 1 – October 31, 2024

The Bloomingdale Library, West 100th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues (across from the 24th precinct station house)
Mon-Tue 10am-7pm | Wed-Thu 11am-7pm | Fri-Sat 10am-5pm

Use of library space by the Bloomingdale Neighborhood History Group for this exhibit does not indicate endorsement by The New York Public Library.
BNHG Is Honored by Three Parks Democrats in Tribute to Cynthia Doty

On May 19, 2024, BNHG was honored by the Three Parks Independent Democrats at their 49th Annual Benefit at The Ellington Restaurant.

We were given the inaugural Cynthia L. Doty Community Service Award, named for the late Three Parks member who was also one of the founders of BNHG. Two BNHG members accepted the award and gave brief remarks to the group. Gil Tauber spoke about the BNHG and its work, and Peter Arndtsen described Cynthia Doty’s role in the early days of the group.

We were in good company. Three Parks gave two other awards, to Hon. Brad Lander, NYC Comptroller, who received the Ted Weiss Public Service Award, and Hon. Daniel J. O’Donnell, NY State Assemblyman, District 69, who received special recognition for 22 years of service.
Place Names in Bloomingdale

Rafael “Monkey” Delgado Way

Walking on Amsterdam Avenue at West 108th Street in early June, we noticed a brand-new street sign that sparked a felicitous conversation with some local folks on the corner that, in turn, led us to learn of Rafael “Monkey” Delgado.

Delgado lived on West 108th Street, near the corner with the sign that bears his name. The dedication and installation of the street sign took place at an event on Saturday, June 1, 2024. Shaun Abreu, NYC Council Member, was present for the dedication. As he commented, “Anyone on 108th Street will tell you that Rafael Delgado — a lovable street sweeper known as Monkey — was the beating heart of this proud Boricua community. A Vietnam vet. A caretaker. A friend. May his spirit live on forever.”

The description of him below is based on information provided by Jennifer Maya Luz Pliego, who prevailed on the NYC Department of Transportation to name the block between Amsterdam Avenue and Columbus Avenue as Rafael “Monkey” Delgado Way.

Raphael “Monkey” Delgado (1953-2022) was a fixture in the neighborhood. Nicknamed “Monkey” by his friends for his proclivity to climb things in his youth, he grew up on West 108th Street with his parents and three siblings. At age 17, he went to Vietnam where he served as a “tunnel rat.” a soldier who explored burrows and tunnels. He came back afflicted, as many were, by PTSD. Despite his trauma, he maintained a golden heart and was a good neighbor, friend, and support to many in his neighborhood.

For years, “Monkey” made it his work to keep the street clean. He was a significant presence, a sentinel of the neighborhood, always ready with a greeting and a habit of friendliness that set a tone of welcome for the blocks of the neighborhood.
In a larger historical context, “Monkey” represents the longstanding Puerto Rican population of our part of Manhattan. His presence and his community contributions were a living example of the impact and resilience of the Puerto Ricans who have populated New York City since the 1940s. The four-block area between West 106th Street to West 110th Street still has Spanish as a primary language. Honoring “Monkey’s” story is also an opportunity to make a statement about the impact of this culture on the wider culture of New York.

**Tanner’s Spring in Central Park Commemorates an Event in the Summer of 1880**

By Pam Tice

One of the few remaining natural springs in Central Park is west of West Drive, at about 82nd Street. Before the Park was built — when Seneca Village existed — it served as a water source for the residents.

Most of the names we attach to Central Park’s buildings and natural features commemorate donors or the type of structure, like Wollman Rink or the Dairy. In the case of water features, just the name of the water body is used, such as the Pool, the Lake, the Reservoir, or the Conservatory Water. Tanner’s Spring, however, is named for Dr. Henry S. Tanner, who pulled a stunt in the summer of 1880: He became an exhibit of a man starving himself.

Dr. Tanner hired Clarendon Hall on East 13th Street and set up an area with a cot, a rocking chair, and a writing stand. On the first day, June 28, 1880, his clothing and cot were searched for hidden food. Several “watching physicians” became his observers and helpers.
Hundreds of visitors paid 25 cents each to bear witness. For the first 10 days, he did not drink water but applied wet clothes to his head. Then he started drinking water, and news reports refer to his watchers taking him for a drive in Central Park. However, no mention is made of his imbibing the spring water in these contemporary reports.

By late July, Dr. Tanner had grown weaker, but kept going. He lost 34 pounds. On August 7, at noon, the fast was over, and Dr. Tanner ate a peach and drank some milk. He was able to leave Clarendon Hall and travel to his doctor's house on East 24th Street, where it was reported he left the carriage and went up the steps vigorously. Later, he consumed a beef steak and a watermelon.

Dr. Tanner became famous, but respectable physicians called his stunt "humbug." He became a proponent of therapeutic fasting and claimed that it helped cure his rheumatism and depression.

This odd New York City event endures today in the place-naming of Tanner's Spring.

**Japan's Nippon Club on West 93rd Street**

By Pam Tice

Japanese immigrants settled in New York City slowly, beginning in the late 19th century. The Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 restricted but did not eliminate Japanese immigration. The Japanese government agreed to stop issuing visas to laborers but allowed others of higher classes. Later, immigration was firmly restricted under the 1924 National Origins Act. Japanese immigrants began to settle around Lincoln Square and then further up into the Upper West Side and Morningside neighborhoods.

In 1905, the Nippon Club was formed as a private social club for gentlemen. It was first located in a townhouse at 334 Riverside Drive, and then at 44 West 85th Street. In 1912, the Club moved to its purpose-built new building at 161 West 93rd Street. The building was designed by architect John Vredenburgh whose other work in our neighborhood includes the plinth for the Joan of Arc statue on Riverside Drive at West 93rd Street.

The Nippon Club was founded by Dr. Jokichi Takamine, a famous chemist who is known for isolating adrenaline in his laboratory in 1901. It was Takamine's townhouse at 334...
Riverside Drive near West 106th Street that first housed the Club.

In 1912, a gift of more than 3,000 cherry trees from the Mayor of Tokyo to the people of the United States established the beautiful flowering trees still part of our celebration of spring. The trees were planted in both Central and Riverside Parks, in the new Sakura Park just north of Grant’s Tomb — and in Washington, D.C.’s Tidal Basin.

In 1921, the New York City Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church purchased the five-story townhouse at 325 West 108th Street for a church on the first floor and a “Japanese Home Club” with dormitory space for students and visitors. Today, this building houses the Bloomingdale School of Music. The Nippon Athletic Club at 250 West 108th Street was another feature in the Bloomingdale neighborhood.

The Nippon Club hosted many dinners and celebrations that included Americans, bringing together important Japanese visitors and American businessmen.

On the night of December 7, 1941, Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia issued many orders, including the closing of the Nippon Club. Many Alien Japanese (called Issei) were rounded up and imprisoned on Ellis Island. American-born Japanese (called Neisi) had to stay in their homes for some time, as LaGuardia announced that they walked the streets at their own risk.

The Nippon Club must have re-opened because, in August of 1942, the Daily News reported an FBI raid there with the arrest of the leader of a Japanese secret society and the seizing of navigation charts of the Aleutian Islands.

Eventually, the Club was confiscated by the Office of the Alien Property Custodian and sold to the Elks for a clubhouse, complete with its Japanese furnishings. Since 1968, Temple Adventista — a Spanish Seventh Day Adventist congregation — has owned the building.

Today, New York City’s Nippon Club and its allied Fujin-Bu Club for women is located on several floors in a modern building on West 57th Street.
An Upper West Side Notable

From Notable New Yorkers of Manhattan’s Upper West Side
By Jim Mackin, Fordham University Press

Morris Meister (1895 - 1975)
Educator
315 Riverside Drive

Morris Meister may be said to be the father of high school science fairs. From 1938 to 1958, he was the founder and first principal of New York City’s elite Bronx High School of Science. He was also the first principal of Bronx Community College from 1966. Meister Auditorium at the high school and Meister Hall at the college honor his service.

Born in Poland, he arrived with his family in the United States when he was seven years old. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from City College of New York and then earned a doctorate in education at Columbia University’s Teachers College in 1921. After teaching science at other prestigious schools — including Stuyvesant High School, the Speyer School, and Horace Mann School — he authored a few science textbooks, co-founded and served as president of the National Science Teachers foundation, and supervised all science-related education in New York City’s public school system. In his later years, he was instrumental in creating the New York Hall of Science on the grounds of the Flushing Meadows World’s Fair. His granddaughter is the renowned soprano Amy Burton.

Firemen’s Memorial

By Pam Tice

As if we needed a reminder of their bravery, in February this year we watched New York City firemen rescue people from a burning building in Harlem by using “rope rescue,” dropping off the roof and grabbing the person trapped by the fire.

Our Bloomingdale neighborhood is fortunate to have a memorial to this bravery in the Firemen’s Memorial at Riverside Drive and West 100th Street.
The memorial project was started in 1908 after Deputy Chief Charles W. Kruger's death at a downtown fire. He was fondly known as “Big-Hearted Charlie.”

Originally planned for Union Square, the memorial was eventually built on a hillside at West 100th Street on the roadway spur of Riverside Drive. A wide staircase from the Drive leads up to a balustraded plaza with a fountain basin and the central monument.

The monument is a marble rectangular structure topped by a bas-relief scene of a horse-drawn engine rushing to a fire. It is flanked on both sides with groups of sculptures representing “Duty” and “Sacrifice.” The fountain was there to serve thirsty horses. In 1927, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals installed a bronze tablet in the plaza beneath the memorial dedicated to the horses that pulled the fire department’s engines.

The memorial was designed by architect Harold Van Buren Magonigle and its sculptures are by Attilio Piccirilli.
After proposing the memorial in 1908, Episcopal Bishop Potter helped raise the funds needed and when he died, Isidor Straus stepped in. Donors ranged from the wealthiest New Yorkers, like J.P. Morgan, to the schoolchildren who gave 25 cents meant for candy.

In 1913, a spectacular parade made its way north from 57th Street to the memorial where a ceremony marked the dedication. Typical of the times, the event included many young girls, dressed in white and carrying roses, whose fathers had died fighting fires. The inscription notes that the firemen’s call of duty is to a “war that never ends.”

Like all city structures, over the years, the memorial showed wear and tear. In the 1930s, WPA funds were used for a restoration. In 1992, the City’s Parks Department restored it again. In 2022, the Riverside Park Conservancy funded additional conservation through the generosity of a private donor. While this article was being written, news came that the nose on the statue “Duty” had been removed in an act of vandalism. I hope that the Parks Department will be able to repair it quickly.

In October of each year, the New York City Fire Department, now led by its first female commissioner, conducts a memorial service at the monument. The event brings hundreds of firemen and women to our neighborhood, reminding us once again of how bravely they serve the City of New York.

Donate!

You can support local history when you support the work of The Bloomingdale Neighborhood History Group. BNHG presents many free programs throughout the year, in person and on Zoom. We display exhibits at the Bloomingdale Public Library. Our website offers numerous blog posts, a usable building database, and many other resources. Donations to our work can be made through a GoFundMe site managed by the Columbus-Amsterdam Business Improvement District, making your gift fully tax-deductible. Visit our website Donation Page to learn more. Thank you!

The Bloomingdale Neighborhood History Group promotes research and education about the history of the Bloomingdale neighborhood, and we are available as a resource. We share our findings through free public programs, walking tours, workshops, publications, a blog, our website www.upperwestsidehistory.org, and a Neighborhood History Collection of materials housed at the Bloomingdale Branch of the New York Public Library, 150 West 100th Street.