

# An Early History *of* Jamaica, Queens

Antara-Prabhat Kalajian

# Introduction: Why Jamaica?

As a child in Seattle, my mother encouraged me to pursue my creative interests, with her homeschooler's approach to learning.

My meditation teacher, Guru Sri Chinmoy, loved American history and the vision of the founders. He lived in Jamaica from 1968 until his passing in 2007. I moved there to be closer to the community of spiritual aspirants he established, and share in stories of their personal experiences with him.

Sri Chinmoy led an active lifestyle; in his recounts of walks and runs all over this neighborhood, he often mentions 150th St. As it turns out, where it meets 85th Drive, very nearby his home is a stone boulder denoting the presence of buried rifle pits, built by Americans during the Revolutionary War. The main battle was fought in Brooklyn, on his birthday, August 27th, just weeks after the Declaration of Independence was signed. This coincidence inspired me to learn more, so I dedicated much time to gathering materials from the library and various online sources.

Every time I would discover a new piece of information about our neighborhood's connection to the past, I would get a thrill. I enjoyed identifying old houses and intersections the most. Some of the most helpful resources were the books *Jamaica* and *Jamaica Estates* by local historian and retired teacher Carl Ballenas with his students. In search of a high-resolution file for printing, and to share the details of my project, I contacted Carl and arranged to meet him in person. He enthusiastically agreed.

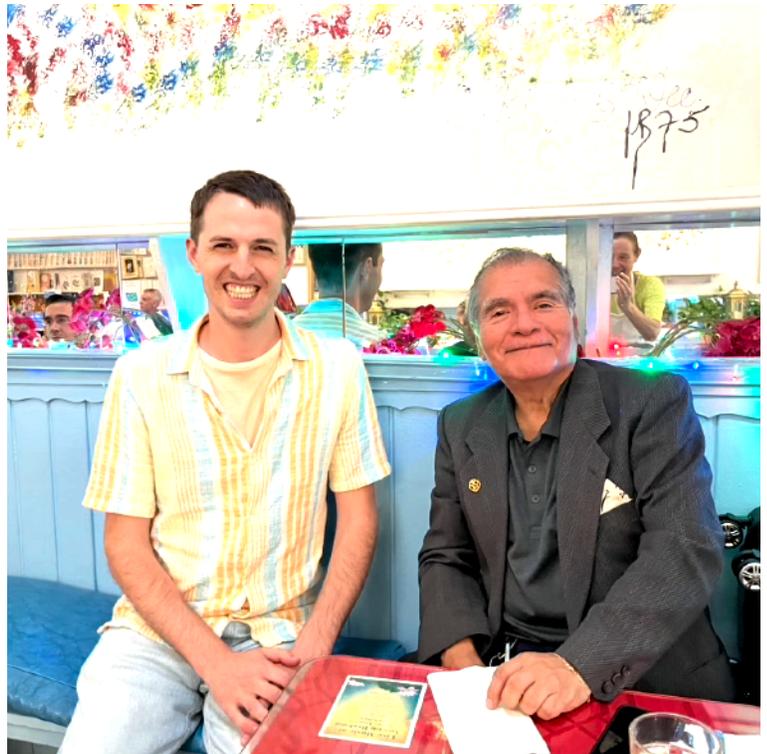
Mr. Ballenas had never heard of the boulder on 150th St, but he dedicated his resources to help uncover period newspaper articles from the boulder's inception in 1911.

I have endeavored to create a complete yet brief overview of what I consider to be relevant highlights, as accurately as possible. If the reader desires more information about a particular topic, I can happily supply available details.

This project has given me a new appreciation for my surroundings, and awakened an awareness of the importance of preserving the legacy within the present moment.

As the 250th birthday of our country approaches, I lovingly dedicate this offering to the heart and soul of America. May she live up to her highest, fullest and deepest potential. Should new and compelling information come to light, I will update the online version of this article.

*Antara-Prabhat, 2026*

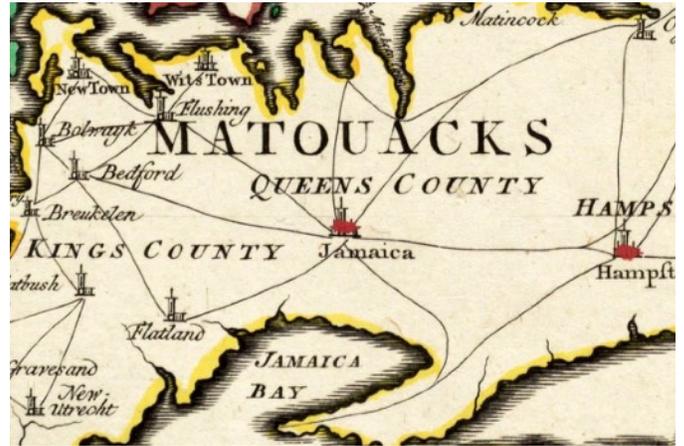


“My America, you are at once God's supreme Promise to mankind and mankind's hope to establish a oneness-world-home. Not the strength of your arms but the infinite strength of your boundless heart to inspire mankind to become a world-oneness-song. You are your hope, and God is His Promise in you.”

*Sri Chinmoy, in an interview at the 1989 Peace Run commencement ceremony.*

## How It Began

Thousands of years ago, New York City was under a 2,000 feet thick sheet of ice. The glaciation deposited huge rocks and sediment, forming the backbone of Jamaica and Long Island. Early Native American Tribes were the first to populate the area. They lived off the land in seasonal villages, trapping, hunting, fishing and farming, and used ancient trails—like those that became Jamaica Avenue and Parsons Boulevard—to trade goods as far as Ohio. They were a peaceful people.



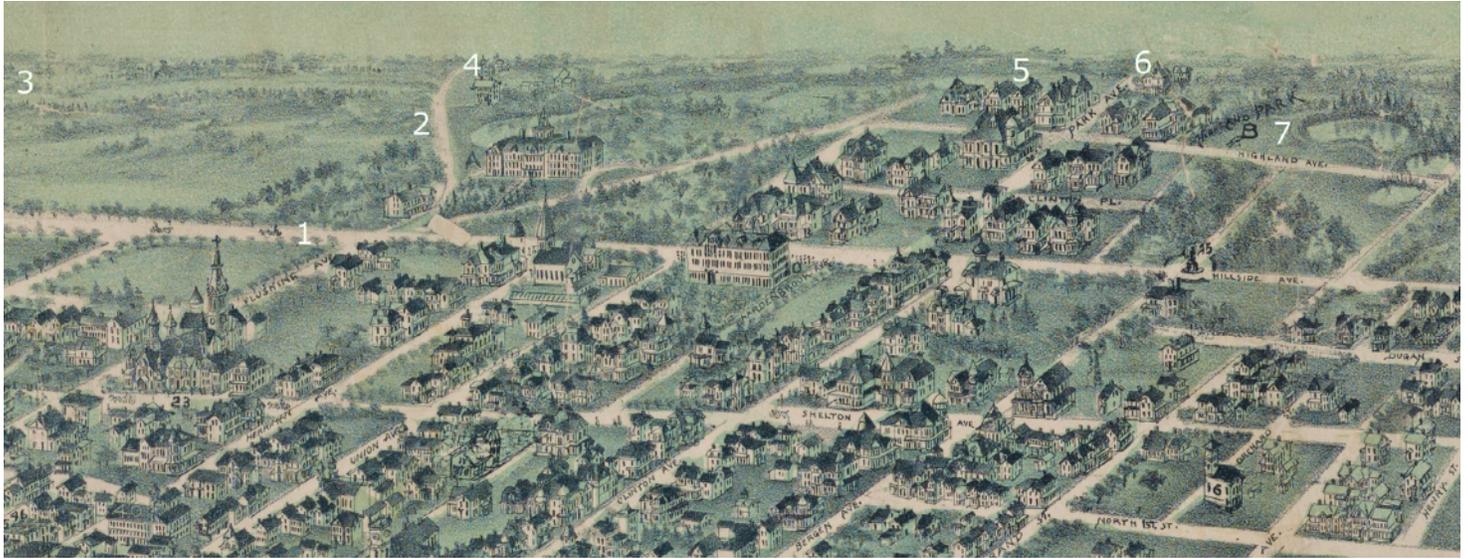
In 1656, under Dutch rule, English settlers from nearby communities, seeking religious freedom and greater self-government, established a colony at Beaver Pond, near today's York College. It was a thriving habitat for beavers, whose pelts were highly prized in Europe at the time. The settlers “purchased” the land from the Natives for “two guns, a coat and a certain quantity of powder and lead.” Originally dubbed Rusdorp, the later name *Jamaica* took shape from the Native word *Jameco* or *Yamecah*, meaning “beaver.” It was one of the first settlements of geographical Long Island. Jamaica grew into a bustling hub for farmers and traders, encompassing a much larger area than it does today. It served as the county seat of Queens from 1683–1788.

George Washington visited in 1790, sleeping at an inn at the crossroads of Jamaica Avenue and Parsons Blvd, remarking it was “a pretty good and decent house.”



*Above: Farmers going to market on Hillside Avenue near Parsons Boulevard in 1904 (Queens Library Archives photo).*

Below: Jamaica in 1895—drawn from a hot air balloon over the course of several days—looking north towards Hillside Avenue and Parsons Blvd.



Above: **1.** Hillside Avenue, **2.** Parsons Blvd/Stores, **3.** Sri Chinmoy's Home, **4.** Panorama Cafe, **5.** Aspiration-Ground, **6.** 164th St/Annam Brahma, **7.** Goose Pond (Captain Tilly) Park

There is only one  
**PROSPECT HILL**  
and few places like it anywhere.

In New York City, in sight of the Ocean, but 145 feet above it, with real country at its back door and real city at its front gate.

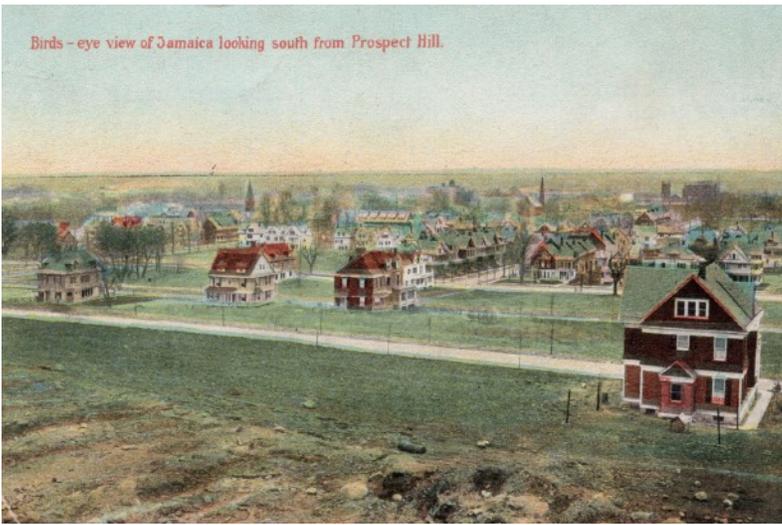
**Ashrita's house**

**Sarama's house**

**Dhanu's house**

25 minutes from Wall Street      Particulars by mail, or 'phone 5880 Broad or 572 Jamaica      **NORMAL LAND CO.**, 52 Broadway, New York

Above: Part of a real estate advertisement. In the early 1900s farmland was split up and sold off, leading to rapid urbanization. Many of the homes built during this period still stand. When the Brooklyn Bridge was completed and celebrated with fireworks, residents of Jamaica enjoyed the view atop Prospect Hill. From its peak at Oceanview Avenue (85th Drive), one could even espy the ocean at Rockaway.



Birds-eye view of Jamaica looking south from Prospect Hill.



*Above left: Looking south above Dhanu's house in 1907.*

*Above right: Ashrita's house around 1910.*

For a while, Jamaica was the desired place to live for people who wanted to be close to Manhattan but longed for the peace of nature. The forests provided respite from the city. The ponds were a place for swimming, sailing, fishing and ice skating.



*Above:*  
Looking east along Hillside Avenue at the intersection of Parsons Boulevard, in 1931.  
(Image courtesy of Queens Historical Society)

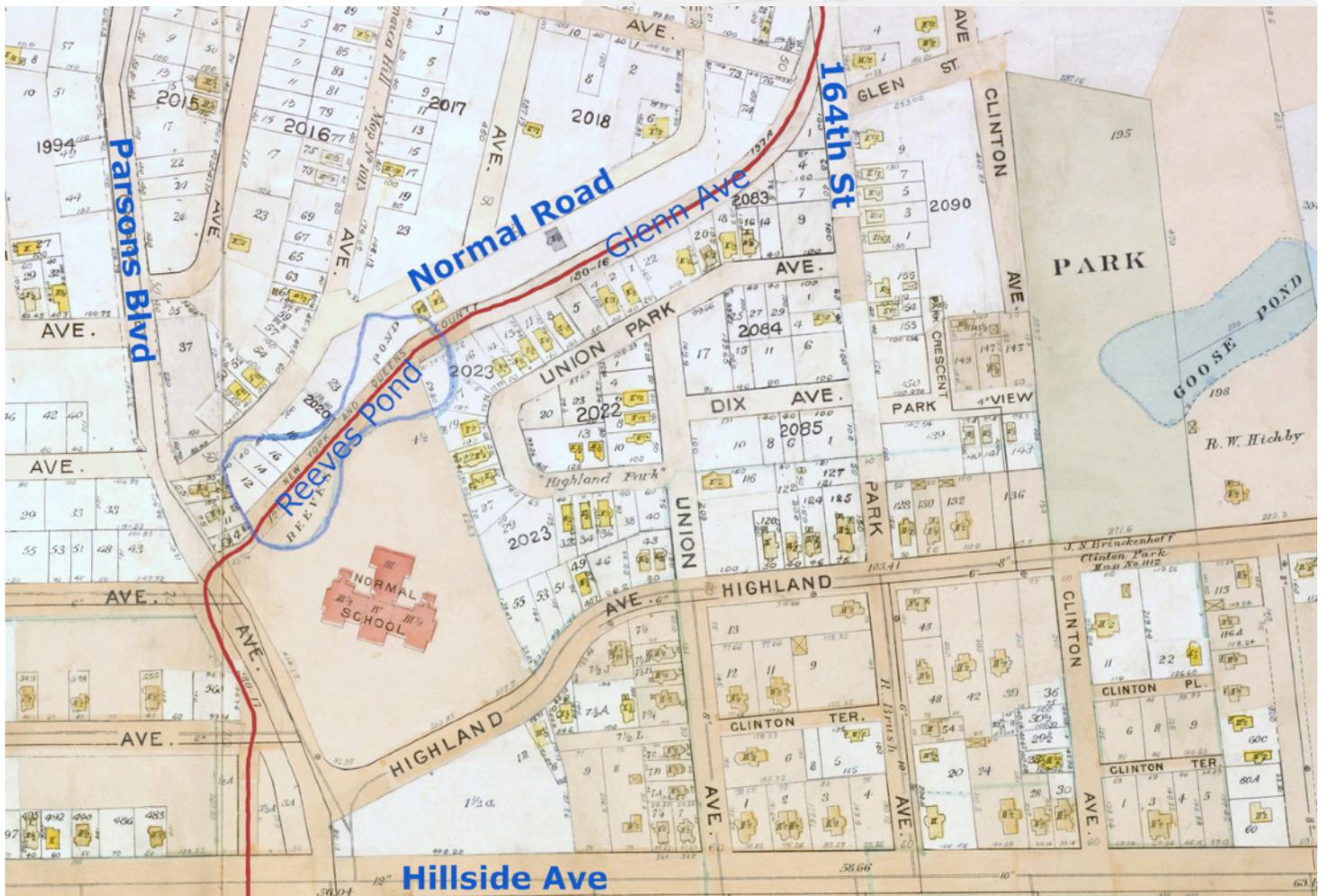
*Right:*  
Residents enjoying sledding at 162nd Street and Hillside Avenue.



# The Jamaica Trolley

The Jamaica Trolley is most well-known in my circle of friends for its role in the formation of the land which would become Aspiration-Ground, our place of meditation.

Some earlier trolleys in the area were horse-drawn; the Jamaica trolley was electric and its top speed was 15-20 mph. The route began near Jamaica Ave & Parsons Blvd, went up the hill towards Normal Road, then east before turning onto 164th St, to Flushing and back.



Across the street from where *Smile of the Beyond* is now, Mr. Reeves allowed his pond to be used by the community, provided they kept it clean. It was the site of several baptisms, and children would play there. Local newspapers report a 14-year-old boy drowned in the pond when he fell from a sailboat in 1871. Reeves Pond was filled in around 1896 by the construction crew of Normal School. On nearby Lake St (151st), a larger body of water spanned two blocks. Near today's Junior High School 217 was a swim hole locals christened "The Swabaloogie." Vinaya's father swam there.

At Parsons & Highland, The Jamaica Training School, also known as Normal School, trained teachers in the standards, or *norms* of education. It existed on the site where Hillcrest and PS86 presently stand, from 1897 until the late 1960s. Ray Romano, Fran Drescher and LL Cool J attended Hillcrest High.



*Above:* In the foreground, the Jamaica Trolley wends its way north above Hillside Avenue on a small side street (155th). Parsons Boulevard is the parallel road. The trolley ran from 1900-1937, at which time it was replaced by bus service.

*Below, left:* Working men lay trolley track on 164th St, near 85th Ave, in the year 1900 (photo from Queens Library Archives). 164th St (Park Ave) had not yet been extended north as a main road.

*Below, right:* When the driveway was resurfaced around 2018, remnants of the track were discovered in this spot.



From here, the trolley traveled north, past Kissena Park and alongside Flushing Meadows Park, to downtown Flushing—where it dropped off and picked up passengers at Main Street and Northern Boulevard.

*Below:* The Jamaica Trolley Line in 1937—its final year of operation—where Aspiration-Ground is now (photo from Queens Library Archives).



After service ended, most of the track was removed, but some stretches, such as the area above, remained visible into the 60s. Plans were made to turn it into a residential street (Glenn Ave) with housing on both sides, but it never happened.

By the time the Centre found the land in 1980, it was neglected but held potential. With approval from the community planning board and local residents, the Sri Chinmoy Centre cleaned it up and

built a tennis court, running track and meditation garden on the site.

*Above:*

*Entrance to Aspiration-Ground in 1992 (Pulak's collection). Note the house in common with the previous photo!*

# The Parsons Family and Kissena Park

Throughout most of the 18th and 19th centuries, Flushing enjoyed a reputation as America's premiere horticultural center. George Washington lingered on his presidential tour with John Adams in 1789. Thomas Jefferson visited Flushing and Jamaica with James Madison in summer 1791. Jefferson placed a large order of plants from Prince Nursery, the first commercial nursery in the country, for his Monticello home.

Flushing was also home to the Bowne family of Quakers, who fought for religious freedom. Parsons Boulevard was named for Samuel Bowne Parsons (1819-1906), a prominent horticulturalist. He established a nursery in what is now Kissena Park. Many of the trees used in the construction of Central Park and Prospect Park were purchased from his nursery. He was an abolitionist and active participant in the underground railroad. Parsons Nursery imported over 100 varieties of exotic trees and was the first to introduce Japanese maples to the US and propagate rhododendrons. When the nursery closed in 1901, much of the stock was cleared; but dozens of saplings were left in place, now fully grown in the upper area of the park, near the tennis courts.

Kissena Lake was formed by glacial activity 20,000 years ago. It is fed by a now-buried stream. The waters are naturally purified in the park's marshland and channeled through an underground tunnel, ending in Flushing Creek.

Prior to becoming a park, ice was harvested from Kissena Lake in winter, stored, and sold during warmer months as an early means of refrigeration.



*Above:* Communal enjoyment of the park in 1927.

# The Battle of Long Island

Washington rode into New York City on April 13th, 1776, after a victorious siege in Boston. The British had embarked for New York, and he was duty-bound to defend it.

Shortly after independence was declared, British ships crowded the harbor—deploying troops to Staten Island and southwest Brooklyn.

Washington initially expected an attack in Manhattan, but also established defenses in Brooklyn Heights.

The British Generals developed a flanking strategy involving a scantily guarded path, learned about from locals loyal to the Crown. In the evening of August 26th, approximately 10,000 British troops—forming a column 2 miles long—sneaked north 9 miles, arriving near today’s Evergreens Cemetery in the wee hours of the morning. There they forced tavern-keeper William Howard and his teenage son, at gunpoint, to show them the way to the Jamaica Pass, cutting west into Brooklyn and surprising the American Army.

In a coordinated attack that began around sunrise on August 27th, the Americans were confronted with assault from three directions and quickly forced to retreat, losing many men who were captured, wounded or killed. One such battalion was the Maryland 400, under Lord Stirling’s command. They bravely held their ground at an old Dutch farmhouse, while some units fell back across the Gowanus Creek, and the bulk of the Army regrouped in the Brooklyn Heights defenses.

Washington’s back was pressed up against the east river, with nowhere to go. It was a victory for the British, who paused for the day to regroup and rest. It would have been an early and decisive end to the war, were it not for a superhuman withdrawal to Manhattan by water at night. 9,000 troops were extracted, some of them injured, without the loss of a single man, weapon or craft; and as day broke,

their movements were hidden from the British by a providential fog.

The Long Island Militia, commanded by General Woodhull, an American Patriot and political leader, remained around Jamaica as the battle raged in Brooklyn, under orders to drive livestock eastward and deprive provisions from enemy hands.

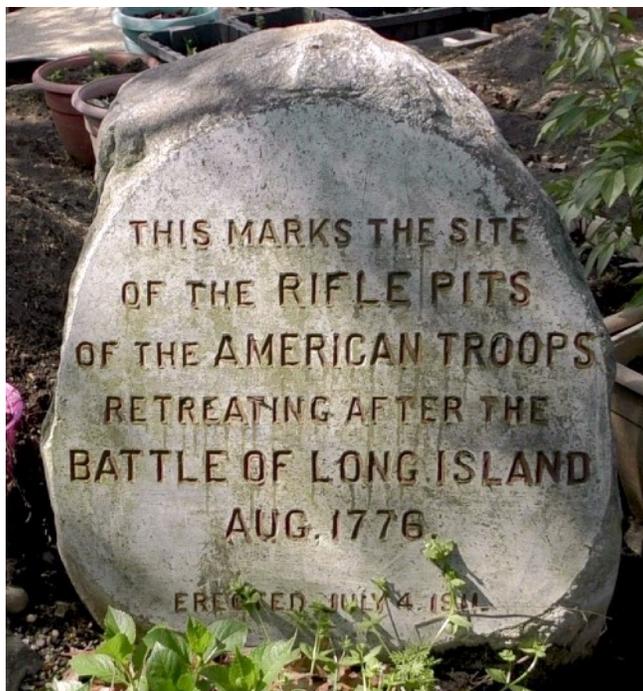
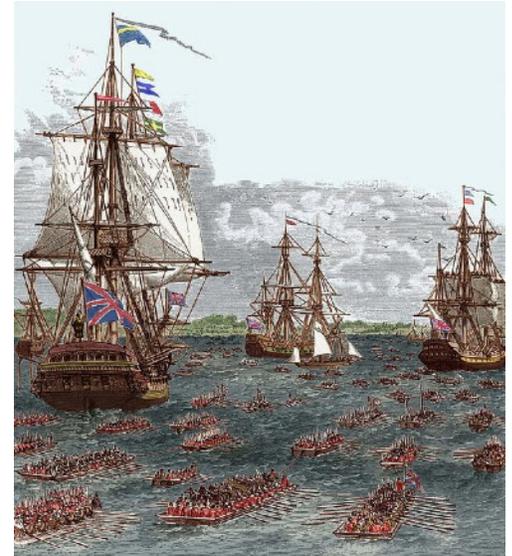
Local tradition suggests that entrenchments on 150th Street were part of an effort to slow the British advance. However, there is no documented battle or large-scale engagement in Jamaica.

Torrential rain and the broader defeat prevented reinforcement, and the militia disbanded.

General Woodhull was captured at an inn near Hollis and wounded, reportedly for saying “God save us all,” instead of “God save the King.” He died in the company of family a month later.

1776 was a most significant year, marking the birth of America as a nation and symbol of promise.

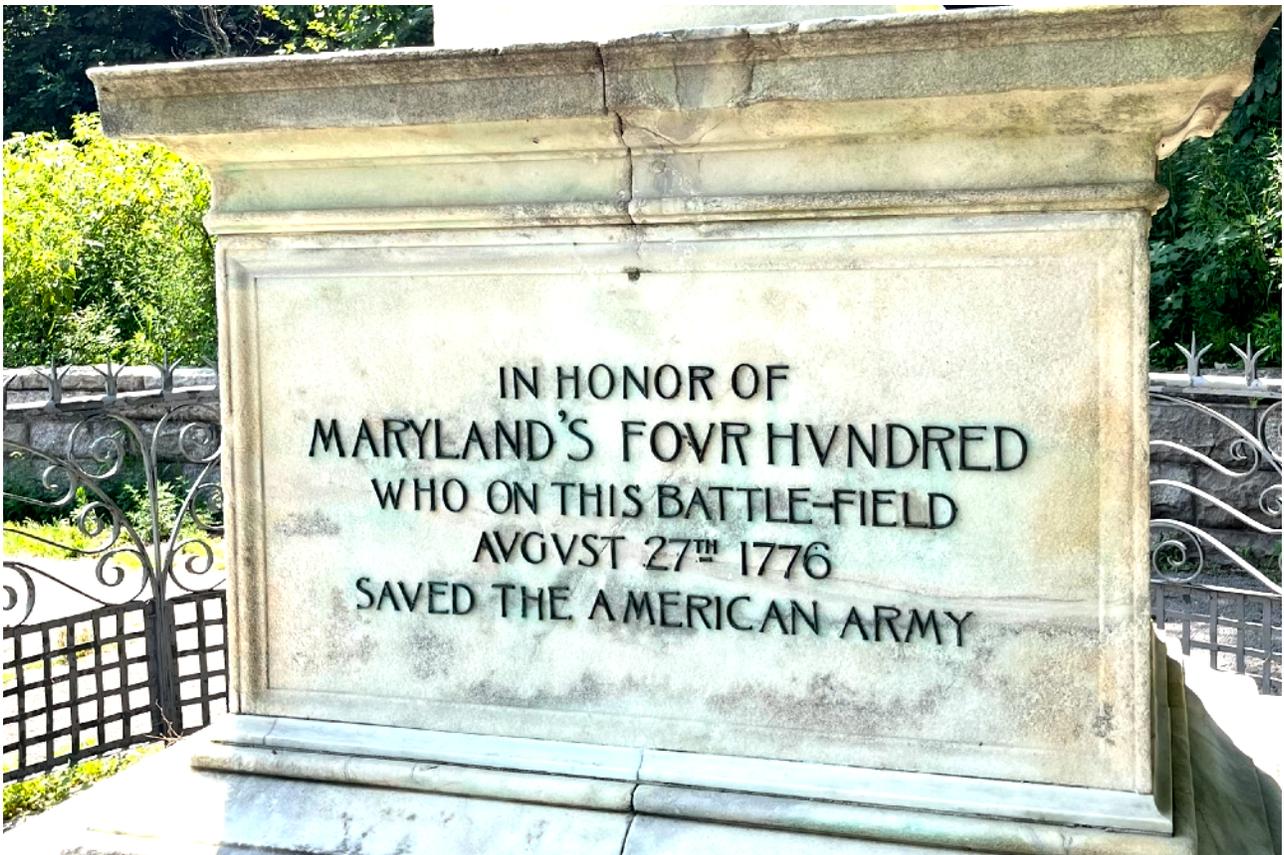
If you wish to immerse yourself in the Battle of Long



Island and the American War of Independence, check out the book *1776* by David McCullough.



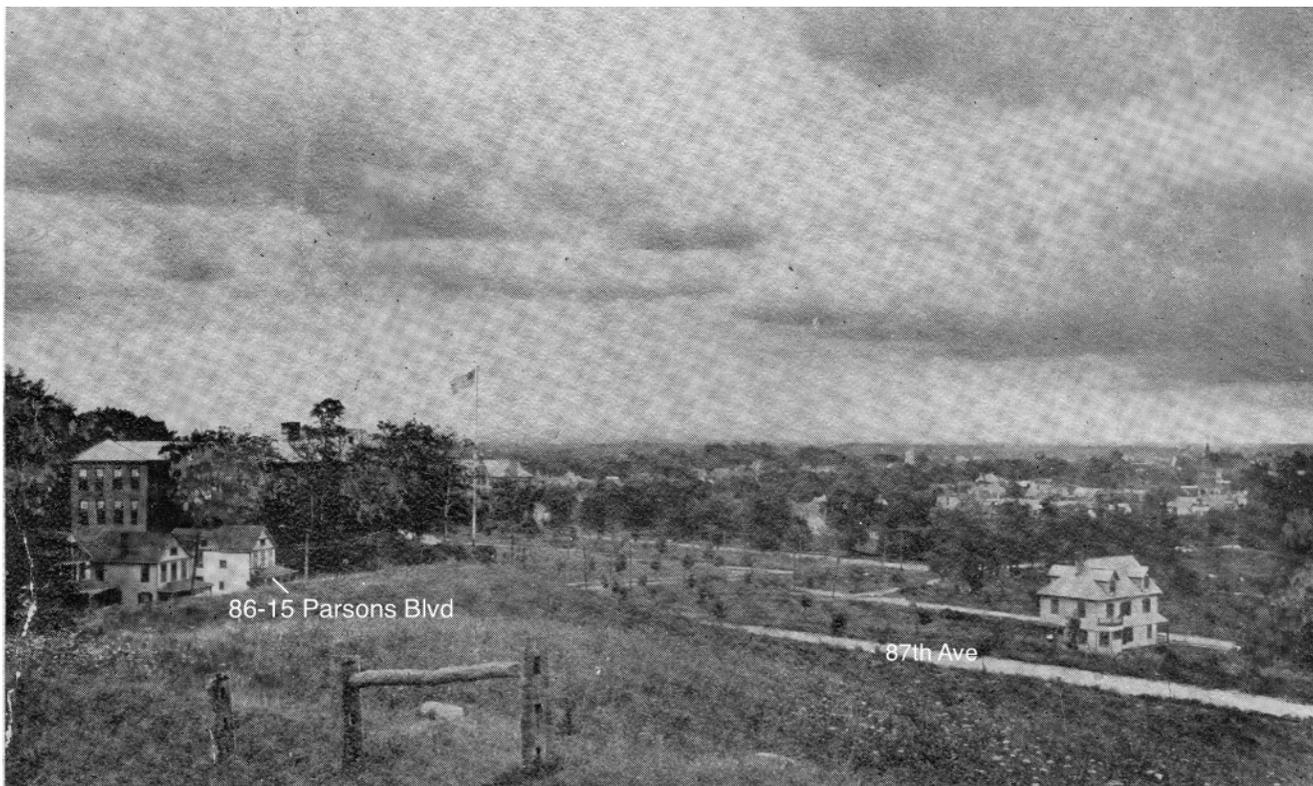
*Above: The Maryland 400, commanded by Lord Stirling, at the Old Stone House and Gowanus Creek.*



*Above: One of several historic markers in Prospect Park dedicated to the Revolutionary War.*



*Above: Looking east on 87th Road in 1930, across the 155th St trolley tracks, towards Parsons Blvd. Normal School is at the top left of this photo, and in the photo below.*



*Above: Looking southeast from the top of Prospect Hill, towards Parsons & Hillside, in 1907. A newspaper report says excavation revealed several cannonballs, presumably from the time of the Revolution.*