

Flatbush Revisited by Marty Suydam

The house at 645 East 23rd Street, a Victorian in the old-Dutch neighborhood of Flatbush, Brooklyn, was narrow, deep, and dimly lit. It had curtains and heavy drapes on windows to keep the sunlight from fading furniture. That same furniture is now in homes of third, and fourth generation descendants.

The house smelled of "old attic" with a hint of mothballs. There was no driveway along either side of the house and no garage, but the original occupants had no car. The backyard was small, but had a small vineyard with large purple grapes, probably only for eating or canning.



Coming up to the front porch, with its rocking chairs and swing, visitors were welcomed by an oval leaded-glass window and heavy, side-light-paneled, etched-glass door that opened into an entry alcove with coat hooks. Upon entry you would walk down the long hallway with guest and family parlors on the right with heavy oak pocket doors. The family parlor had a large upright piano in it. There was a large cast iron bank safe midway down the hall holding a domineering position in hallway and a dumbwaiter near the dining room at the end. Where did the dumbwaiter go – basement or second floor? In the kitchen you could see where Emmaline, the "colored" maid, had hung out laundry. There was a back staircase that led from the kitchen to the second floor hallway the included a landing with a toilet "for the help" with the wooden overhead water tank with pull chain. Upstairs, in the second floor were two bedrooms with an adjoining bath and a small bedroom converted to a sewing room, and a third floor, attic, and two bedrooms.

Off the second floor was a screened and windowed summer porch. This porch is where my sister, Betty, would sleep when she visited. It was the coolest place in the house in summer. My family ties to this home go back to my Grandpa Suydam even though I never knew him and only knew Nannie Suydam on her infrequent visits.

Grandpa Suydam never drove a car; he had a chauffeur named Battles, a distinguished and kind "gentleman's man" dressed in a dark suit and cap. When Grandpa visited our house in New Jersey, Battles always stayed outside in the big Packard. Grandpa would come in and go to his usual chair in the sun porch and take a nap. After his nap he left and went to our uncle's house a few blocks away to spend the rest of the day. Once, when it was Betty's birthday, Grandpa Suydam gave her \$5 and Battles took her and her friends to the movies and back – this was a big deal since none of her friends knew anything about chauffeured cars.

William (Grandpa) and Jennie (Nannie) Suydam moved there when he was young clerk. In later years Grandpa Suydam would become a successful Vice President of international at Central Hanover Bank, 1 Wall Street, killed going back to work the day after he retired in a car-pedestrian accident. Grandpa and Nannie lived in that house until their deaths, raising four children, William Jr. (Harper), Grace, Dorothy (Dot), and Martin (Mart).



Houses live. They change over the years, as do the people who occupy them. So the memory of a house may be like our memories of people. Today's Flatbush house went through a "modernization" in the 1970's. Much of the classic Victorian features are no longer present. In a recent picture we can now see an entry door midway on the left side of the house. It is likely that as part of the 1970's renovation the house was divided into upstairs and downstairs apartments. Today the house is not so grand, but its structure and spirit have remained intact. In New York City the neighborhood populations change along with the larger ethnic shifts. The Dutch became English, Irish, Italian, and now African-American. Flatbush is much like the New York. At each step the servants graduated to become the owners. Vacated by the Suydam family in 1955, how many different owners have lived there since?

Can a house remember like a human? What memories would it share "if these walls could talk." There would probably be fond memories of children being born and growing up, leaving and returning for visits. Also, there would be sad memories of occupants leaving, living alone, or dying. Maybe memories can be passed down in writing and family discussions. With this memoir, the house has been brought back to life, if only in our collected memories, but the house lives on.

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