“Keeping History Alive”

Queens Memory Project Sets Stage To Capture, Preserve Borough’s Past

By JASON BANREY

Rising out of the swamp and ash dumbs of what was once a desolate and deserted area, Flushing Meadows Coro-

nara Park became a sight to see in 1939. From a barren wasteland, Robert Moses, one of the nation’s most prolific

urban planners, carved from a wasteland his very own international spectacle, which gave more than 44 million spec-
tors a glimpse of “the world of tomorrow,” right here in the county of Queens.

From a population of a little over one

million residents who helped play host
to that great World’s Fair of 1939, Queens

is now more than double in size and

boasts a community of the most ethn-

cally diverse denizens in the nation, if not

the world.

Today, many of the borough residents cannot recall those days of just 80 years ago — most of us are either immigrants or

the children of immigrants, so it is not

worth into our family’s history. Although

the searing heat of that grand opening
day of April 1939 will always resonate as
an magnificent moment in the minds of

scores of individuals who once lived to

see it, that generation is fading, and it

is unclear if the memories they carry will

pass to future generations.

That is about to change.

The Project Begins

In the 1920s, before the borough’s first

World’s Fair was even a glimmer in

Moses’ eye, Annalou Christensen was

whisked from her home on West 14th

Street in Manhattan by her father to live

in Woodside, Queens, a neighborhood in

the process of being developed for

wealthy families as a summer getaway.

“When we came there were little roads,” said Christensen of the surrounding area

of her home, which stood on Cherry Av-

enue at the northern end of Smart Street,

just a couple of blocks from Flushing

Hospital.

“This was an area of summer homes. Traveling from Manhattan was a long journey,” she said. Today, it’s only a 20-

minute trip to downtown Flushing from

our island neighbor.

A photograph of Annalou Christensen from 1924 is available to viewers who log on to the Queens Memory Project Web site.

Christensen’s memory, of a Flushing

which once was, remains with us today even after her passing, and is the first of what some hope to be the beginning of a vast collection of oral histories donated by the borough’s residents to become a part of the unprecedented undertaking now known as the Queens Memory Project.

What began as an independent study project has laid the foundation for a cre-

ative and interactive process that is capt-

uring the borough’s history seen through

the eyes of our oldest residents before

their recollection slips through the cracks

time.

One year ago, as a Special Collections

and Archives Fellow in the Queens

College Libraries, Natalie Milbrodt, now
director of the project, single-handedly began conducting interviews, recording

history as it was remembered by its par-

ticipants of the past.

With a $25,000 grant from the Metropo-

tian New York Library Council in 2010, Milbrodt was able to establish collabora-
tion with the Archives of the Queens Li-

brary. With the funds and a team of able

student archivists, Milbrodt was able to

combine images, interviews and records,
to form the first-ever digital archive of contemporary and historical records of

life in the borough.

Harnessing Web 2.0 technology, the

Queens Memory Project’s Web site, queensmemoryproject.org, allows visi-
tors to contribute their own photographs, sounds and videos in a project Queens’

Borough President Helen Marshall said “will go a long way in restoring our collective memories by depositing

them in one place.”

The Library Helps

Nearly a century ago, the Archives at

the Queen Library began a similar quest by collecting any and all mate-

rials, documenting the natural, social, economic and political history of Long Island’s four counties: Queens, Kings, Nassau and Suffolk.

As the library’s special collections continued increasing, the 115-year-old institution became recognized as one of the nation’s preeminent res-
sources for Long Island research.

Along the way, the emergence of the digital age presented itself as a viable tool to retain historical artifacts and documents for newer genera-
tions smitten by the popularity and availability of the home computer. But in the 90s, as Queens Library officials and local historical societies seri-

ously began to discuss digitizing the vast collection the institution had amassed, plans were quashed due to a lack of resources and the always looming constraints to the library’s budget.

Today, the borough’s Central Li-

brary, located in Jamaica, is home to

the Digital Assets Management depart-

ment, which has been actively digitally capturing and preserving its century-old archives, which it soon will display on its own interactive Web site. The Queens Tribune is proud to have its entire history as part of the library’s digital archive.

“With the Queens Memory Project providing an introduction of displaying contemporary information, it will help

draw people into what we have been doing here,” said John Hyslop, Digital Assets Manager at the Queens Library.

“It also provides us with a venue to draw young people in toward information which has been on record for decades.”

Although the Queens Library has dedicated itself to digitally preserving documents of all of Long Island’s four counties, it has focused efforts to pre-
serve the history of Queens, dedicating hundreds of thousands of dollars to di-

tally archive primary as well as second-

ary sources of information and making it readily available at the fingertips of those

willing to access it, as oppose to crowd-
sourced information generated by popu-

lar Web sites such as Wikipedia.

History Personified

Borough Historian Jack Eichenbaum has set himself apart. As both student and teacher of the borough’s history, he

stands out in a technological age, offer-

ing city residents a more tactile experi-

ence than the internet can offer.

For more than three decades, Eichenbaum has guided thousands of participants on his historically niche and
diversified walking tours, discussing many of the world’s greatest moments in

history which are interwoven into each of the borough’s neighborhoods.

By geographically molding tours to

An inside look of the Central Library re-

displays the digitization process which is cur-

rently underway.

Queens’ communities, viewers are not only able to experience the past first hand, but also understand history as it unfolded.

“I can talk about the Old Quaker Meet-

ing House, but I can best talk about it in

front of it,” he said of the historical site

where Dutch freeholders signed the

Flushing Remonstrance of 1657, the pre-

cursor of what would eventually set the

stage for the United States Constitution’s

provision on the freedom of religion in

the Bill of Rights.

Over the years, Eichenbaum has seen a decline in people interested in the sig-

nificance the borough holds in history, noting that the borough’s younger gen-

eration of ethnically diverse residents are often unaware of the history their home

holds.

As the average age of members of the

Queens Historical Society continues to rise, Eichenbaum worries and wonders who will carry the torch of history to fu-
ture generations. There’s a lot riding on the

Queens Memory Project.

“With a lot of people coming from out-

side the country and from all around the

states that don’t know about this great

place, I continue to wonder who will carry

all this on,” Eichenbaum said reminis-

cing over his career as a historian. “New

York City has certainly changed a lot.

We’ll just have to wait and see.”

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John Hyslop, Digital Assets Manager of the Queens Library shows off a state of the art flatbed scanner which will soon be used to digitize its book collection.