

How Our Feast of the Assumption Began



In 1910, Italian immigrants, originally from Durrazzano, Saviano and Naples who had all relocated to Westbury in New York, wanted to bring some of their traditions from Italy to America. One of the main traditions was to have a Feast to honor the saints; however, they could not decide on a name because they all wanted to name the feast after the patron saint of their own local villages.

Father McGinnis, the pastor of Saint Brigid's Church in Westbury, suggested that they have a Feast to honor the Blessed Mother, Mary the Mother of God. Everyone agreed. They nominated several organizers to run the Feast. Nicola Piscitelli, Pasquale Simonetti, Carmine Lagnese, and Constantino Posillico were the leaders of the group. They decided that the Feast they would honor would be the Feast of the Assumption. The Feast of the

Assumption is a holiday in many countries, including Italy, and celebrates Mary's assumption into Heaven. Now that it was decided that there would be a Feast, the leaders needed to raise money. They went throughout the Italian community to ask for donations for entertainment, fireworks and most importantly, to purchase a statue of the Blessed Mother. They collected whatever they could, and people donated nickels and dimes in order to help make the Feast a success.

On August 14, 1910, the evening before the very first Feast, the leaders, a band and a pickup truck gathered at the Feast grounds. They were to march up Union Avenue to New Cassel and then back to Maple Street and Post Avenue until they arrived back at the Feast grounds. All along the way, people donated homemade wines, pasta, rabbits, chickens and homegrown vegetables. All of these things were taken back to the grounds in the pickup truck and the donations were to be auctioned off the following day at the feast.

On August 15, the leaders followed the same route as the night before. A band accompanied them along with a statue of the Blessed Mother. There were lights strung along Railroad Avenue and parts of Post Avenue to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption. The Italian community joined in as well. The leaders carried the statue of the Blessed Mother on a platform high in the air during the entire route. People would bid money for the honor of carrying the statue. The amount of time one carried the statue was determined by the amount of their donation. As the statue made its way through the streets of Westbury, people stopped to pin money on her as a tribute to the Blessed Mother. In addition to the leaders and the community walking the feast route, a fireworks expert was on hand. If you could afford it, you could pay to have the statue brought to the front of your house and have fireworks fired into the sky in front of your home.

The procession would then go down Post Avenue to St. Brigid's Church where a special Mass was held. After the Mass, the procession would continue up through Breezy Hill and then onto the Feast grounds. The entire length of the procession route was approximately 4 miles. The Feast continued all afternoon with the sale of Italian food, beer, wine and soda, and there were also games for the children.

In the evening, an auction would be held with all the items that were donated the previous night. The Feast came to a close in the evening with a glorious display of fireworks.

Following the success of the 1st Feast and the continued desire for the Italian community to celebrate their heritage, on July 11, 1911, the leaders and some of the local members of the Italian community in Westbury formed the Societa' Maria SS. MA Dell'Assunta, presently called the Maria SS. Dell'Assunta Society. The main function of the Society is to strengthen and affirm their faith towards the Holy Roman

Catholic Church and to promote and maintain Italian religious and cultural traditions exclusively through religious, charitable and educational activities.

Although the Feast of the Assumption has always been held in Westbury, the location within the town has changed over the years. From its inception in 1910 to approximately 1935, the Feast was held on Railroad Avenue. From 1936 to 1953, the Feast resided in a part of Breezy Hill on Fulton Avenue and Old Country Road. In 1954 the Feast moved once again; this time to the St. Brigid's Church parking lot where it stayed until the mid 1960's. For the first fifty years, the Feast kept to its same protocol as the first one.

The only exception came in 1942. The American Legion decided to petition the Village of Westbury to stop the Dell'Assunta Society from holding the Feast. They felt that since the US was at war with Italy, the Society shouldn't celebrate being Italian. The Society argued that it was a religious holiday and that many other denominations recognized and observed the sacred day. The leaders of the Society decided that the feast would still be held. Since the Village would not allow the procession on the Village streets, the Society members marched along the sidewalks. They respectfully carried the statue of the Blessed Mother along with all of the banners and flags to St. Brigid's Church where they celebrated with a Mass for the Blessed Mother. In 1943, the ban was lifted, and the Feast resumed as usual in the Breezy Hill section of Westbury.

In 1946 the Society decided that although the statue of the Blessed Mother was beautiful, it was too heavy to carry and stopped using it during the procession. A motorized float was designed to carry the statue, but later, a manual float was introduced so that people could push the statue throughout the streets. In 1979 it was determined that the statue should be pushed on the float for a portion of the procession, and for the rest of the route, it would be carried by our Society members. Our members are proud to be a part of this wonderful tradition. Giuseppi Rizzano carried the banner in the procession from the first Feast in 1910 until his death in the 1960's. Since then, his son Joseph has proudly carried the banner.

Eventually, the Feast found a home in the parking lot of St. Brigid's school. The Feast is currently held for five days and the Mass and the procession are still held on August 15 which is the actual Feast Day of the Assumption of our Blessed Mother. Over the years the Feast has been expanded to include rides, games, entertainment, vendors, beer, wine, and of course, homemade Italian cuisine prepared by the members of the Dell'Assunta Society. To this day, there are beautiful fireworks which are provided by Gucci Fireworks and Bay Fireworks.

The Feast of the Assumption is definitely a family affair and is steeped in so many wonderful traditions. Today, many of our current members are children and grandchildren of the founding members of the Dell'Assunta Society. There are also charter members that are still active in the Society and in the Feast. We are honored to be able to celebrate over 100 years of Italian tradition, faith, culture and pride.