

# The History of the Maria S.S. Dell'Assunta Society



Since 1911, The Maria S.S. Dell'Assunta Society has been serving the needs of St. Brigid's Roman Catholic Church and the Village of Westbury, NY, while preserving Italian traditions. The Society is proud to reflect back at their first one hundred years as they look forward to a bright future.

## The Early Years

The origins of the Society date back to 1910, when a group of Italian immigrants from the villages of Durazzano, Nola and Saviano were looking for a way to preserve some of their Italian traditions in their new home in the United States. One of their traditions was to have a feast to honor different saints, typically the patron saint of their village. The immigrants wanted to hold a feast in their new home, however, the immigrants were from different villages and each wanted to honor the patron saint of their native village. Therefore, they were not able to come to agreement on which saint to honor. Father William McGinnis, Pastor at St. Brigid's Roman Catholic Church in Westbury, suggested that the group honor Mary, the Blessed Mother of Christ. As a result, the first Feast of the Assumption was held in Westbury, NY on August 15, 1910.

The Maria S.S. Dell'Assunta Society was founded on July 11, 1911, when some of the original Feast organizers met at the home of Nicola Piscitelli to discuss forming a mutual aid society. The group, most of whom were already citizens of the United States, wanted to preserve their Italian culture and Catholic religious heritage while becoming good Americans. Nicola Piscitelli became the first President of the Society, and the first members of the board of directors were Nicola Piscitelli, Frank Coppola, Oreste Lagnese, Carmine M. Lagnese, Pasquale Simonetti, John Iadevia and Luigi Lagnese.

The members of the Society held their second annual Feast of the Assumption on August 15, 1911. Society members were required to attend a special Mass on the day of the Feast, and then form a procession through the streets of Westbury Village carrying a statue of the Blessed Mother. This tradition is still followed today.

## Construction of Dell'Assunta Hall

The members of the Society continued to meet regularly wherever they could, including members' homes and the backrooms of bars. Throughout the years immediately following the founding of the Society the number of members grew, and the Society needed more room to hold meetings. They had asked permission to use St. Brigid's Parish Hall but were refused, so the members of the Society decided to build their own meeting hall. As the Great Depression was beginning in 1929, the Society obtained a deed for the property on Maple Avenue in Westbury for \$100.00. Prospects to complete the construction of a hall looked bleak due to the economic situation, but the members worked diligently to raise the rest of the money needed to complete construction through loans, gifts and credit from a local lumber yard. A mortgage from a non-member, Felix Eannacone provided the balance of the funding necessary to pay for the hall's construction. Many of the Society's members were involved in the construction trade and they were able to help in completing the hall.

The completed hall was dedicated on Columbus Day in 1933. To this day, the building, now a landmark in the Village of Westbury, serves as the site of the Society's meetings. An annual Columbus Day dinner-dance is held at the hall by the Society to commemorate the dedication. The hall serves as the site of many of the cultural functions in the village of Westbury, and at one time was the site for many wedding

receptions.

### **The 1930's Through 1975**

On November 14, 1933 the Ladies Auxiliary was formed to assist the Society. Although the Auxiliary was part of the Society it had its own president and board of directors. Josephine Foglia was chosen as the first President of the Auxiliary.

The next period of time was difficult for the Society. During the Great Depression, the members of the Society did what they could to help their fellow members and the Catholic Church with mutual aid and donations to get through the difficult economic times.

The years of World War II were especially challenging for the Society. Due to wartime blackouts the annual Feast of the Assumption was forced indoors and was held inside the Dell'Assunta Hall. A larger problem concerned the Italian background of the Society's members. As the United States was at war with Italy, anti-Italian sentiments in Westbury and throughout the United States ran high. The Society was denied permission to hold their traditional procession through the streets of Westbury with the statue of the Blessed Mother on the Feast of the Assumption. The Society argued that they were a religious organization and that they would honor the Blessed Mother as they saw fit, so the members of the Society decided to move the procession to the sidewalks – which no one could deny them access to. The following year the procession was moved back to the streets of the Village and continues on the streets to this day.

In 1946, financial trouble forced then President Dominic J. Piscitelli to rent the upper hall of the Society Hall to the New York State Water Commission. Meetings and social functions were held in the lower hall. This arrangement helped the Society become financially secure.

A popular social function of this time period was the "Italian Football Wedding". Football Weddings resulted from the marriage of two people from large Italian- American families who could not afford a traditional wedding reception for a large number of people. They resorted to making their own sandwiches and Italian cookies and desserts and gathered in large rooms like the Dell'Assunta Hall, where they would toss sandwiches around like footballs. Many current members of the Society have fond memories of these weddings.

During the late '40's and early '50's, the location of the annual Feast of the Assumption changed to various sites in Westbury such as John Street, Old Country Road and St. Brigid's parking field. Fireworks had become a tradition of the Feast and continued until a convent was built on the parking field at St. Brigid's. The Feast is now held in the parking lot of St. Brigid's School on Maple Ave.

The Presidents that helped mold the Society in the early years were Nicola Piscitelli, Pasquale Simonetti, Carmine M. Lagnese, Alfonso Iannucci, Dominic J. Piscitelli, Frederico Tafuro, Michael J. Lagnese and Michael L. Lagnese.

### **1976 – Present**

In 1976, during the tenure of President Joseph R. Piscitelli, a candlelight procession was initiated as part of the procession of the statue of the Blessed Mother. Fireworks were also included in the Feast of the Assumption for special occasions such as our Nation's Bicentennial in 1976 and the 75th and 80th Anniversary of the Feast of the Assumption in 1985 and 1990 respectively. In 1986 the Dell'Assunta Hall was renovated and re-dedicated. As a result, the upper Hall was available for meetings and social functions once more.

In the early '90's, under the tenure of Lenny Aloisio as President, the Society gained tax exempt status. Renovations to the Dell'Assunta Hall were completed and over 30 new members were added to

the Society. Lenny also served as Co-Chairman of the "The Tree of Life" program, which helped raise over \$2 Million for St. Brigid's Church. The ties between the Society and St. Brigid's were strengthened at this time and many members of the Society and Ladies Auxiliary served in the Parish as Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors, Parish Outreach, and Church Decorating Committee members.

On January 1, 1998, the Dell'Assunta Society and the Dell'Assunta Ladies Auxiliary were formally united to become one unified organization with one governing body. Joseph N. Pascarella served as the first President of the combined organization. Under the unified governing body, the membership of the Society has greatly increased.

In August 2010, the Society celebrated the 100th annual Feast of the Assumption in Westbury. The Feast included many of the same elements as the first Feast in 1910, especially the Mass for the Feast of the Assumption at St. Brigid's Roman Catholic Church, and a procession with the statue of the Blessed Mother through the streets of Westbury to the Feast grounds. The Feast also included rides, games, Italian singers and entertainment, traditional Italian food, beer and wine and fireworks. The Society is proud to carry the traditions of the Feast into the 21st Century.

The Society has supported many organizations through the years, including a pledge of \$10,000 to the St. Brigid's Millennium Fund and \$10,000 to the St. Brigid's Tree of Life. In addition to St. Brigid's Parish, the Society has also provided support to the following:

- Westbury Village Beautification
- Westbury Neighborhood House
- Senior Citizens of Westbury
- Parents of Murdered Children
- Interfaith Nutritional Network
- Mercy Hospital
- The Salvation Army
- The Red Cross
- St. Brigid's School Scholarship Fund (in the name of Joseph R. Piscitelli and Alfonso J. Iannucci to help young children with reading difficulties to attend "The Hofstra Program")
- Donations of books to St. Brigid's School library

The members of the Dell'Assunta Society are proud to celebrate their 100th anniversary in 2011. The Society began as a way for a small group of Italian immigrants to share their traditions, their religious devotion and their dedication to their new home in the United States. Over the years the Society has been able to assist many individuals and organizations in need, and they continue to do so today.

Although many things have changed over the past century, some things remain the same. The Maria S.S. Dell'Assunta Society represents tradition, religious commitment, devotion, fortitude, generosity, endurance, friendship, love and family. Even today, many descendants of the founding members of the Society proudly carry on the work that was started one hundred years ago. Their hope is that future generations will carry the Society into the next one hundred years as proudly and enthusiastically as those who preceded them.