



# HERITAGE RECOGNITION PROGRAM

## To Identify and Honor Great Neck's Most Notable Homes & Buildings



## GREAT NECK VILLAGE SCHOOL

This charming building was the first church on the Great Neck peninsula when it was built in 1863 on land donated by Henry Allen. It became known as Union Free Chapel, and then Union Chapel. Services were led by visiting Protestant preachers and open to all denominations. When larger churches were constructed nearby, the congregation dwindled and the building was donated to the Great Neck community. A Board of Trustees, including Louise Eldridge, was named to maintain it.

During World War I Mrs. Eldridge urged the Board to use the building for the Red Cross and French Relief. Afterwards, the building became the Woman's Club headquarters. In 1922, in cooperation with the of the Woman's Club Drama Committee, the Chapel Theatre was established for performances by both amateur and professional actors. Mrs. Eldridge had a special affection for the place where she had attended Sunday school, and she worked dilligently to transform the building into a modern theatrical space. Over the years the potbellied stove was replaced with a furnace, a wing was added at the rear for a stage, the floor was sloped, straight wooden chairs were replaced by comfortable auditorium seats, and a workshop annex was constructed. The little theatre also had excellent lighting equipment. Community groups, two of them named Great Neck



Union Chapel before the wing was added.

Players, staged plays, sometimes with the help of resident professionals such as Max Figman. In June 1938, a Summer Playhouse opened the first production of a ten-week season with *Yes My Darling Daughter*. In attendance at the premiere were Mrs. Louise Eldridge, Mrs. Lewis Eldridge, Mrs. William Barstow, Mr. and Mrs. J. Edward Meyer, Mrs. Arthur Hammerstein, Colonel and Mrs. Arthur S. Dwight, Mrs. Cord Meyer, and Hoyt Miller. In July 1939, Ethel Barrymore opened in the play *Whiteoaks*. Among other celebrities who performed on its stage were Clifton Webb, Fay Wray, Ernest Truex, and a young Katharine Hepburn (who was fired after one performance). During its years as a theater the building also housed a progressive kindergarten and a drama school under the direction of Broadway star Donald Brian.

In 1947, when the schools became overcrowded, the Board of Education took over the building for two kindergarten groups. In 1950, the former chapel was donated to School District No. 7 by the Great Neck Society for Social and Educational Advancement. After the seats were removed, the floor leveled and a snack bar installed, the building served as a youth center for secondary school students and young people from ages 18 to 30. Since 1970 the building has housed the Great Neck Village School, the district's alternative high school serving up to 50 students annually.

Over the years the Union Chapel building, which Mrs. Eldridge described as pure French Gothic, has served the Great Neck Community in many ways. Except for the annex, which was added in 1938, the exterior of this historic structure remains essentially unchanged after 150 years.

