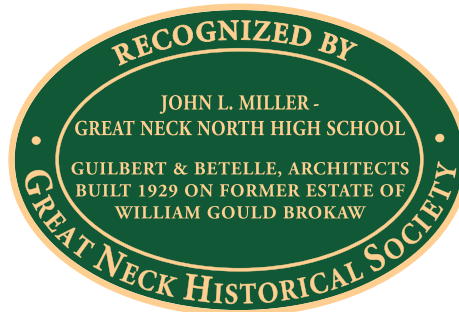


## HERITAGE RECOGNITION PROGRAM

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



### JOHN L. MILLER – GREAT NECK NORTH HIGH SCHOOL

Great Neck High School was constructed in 1929 with a \$1,500,000 bond issue after strong population growth required a larger building for the district students. The graduating class was now 56 students; eight years earlier, the senior class had just three students and the dropout rate was ninety-one percent. The new school was planned as a combined junior-senior high, but it soon became apparent there would be more students than first anticipated, so the seventh grade classes were kept in the elementary schools. The new high school on Polo Road replaced the crowded facility at the corner of Arrandale Avenue and Middle Neck Road, and a building west of it. The land was acquired through condemnation of a portion of the William Gould Brokaw estate, “Nirvana,” which covered 125 acres and included a polo field and half-mile horse race track. Brokaw’s property was the scene of many special events; during World War I the Red Cross staged a benefit performance on the land, and George M. Cohan sang “Over There” for the first time. Streets near the school are named after Brokaw family members and the estate: Brokaw Lane, William Street, Gould Street, Florence Street, Nirvana Avenue and Polo Road.



The architects, Ernest F. Guilbert and James Oscar Betelle, were prolific designers known for their creation of a new American “Collegiate Gothic” style of school architecture. An article in the *Great Neck Record* hailed the new building as “Beautiful...Thoroughly Modern...Designed and Equipped to Give Local Youth Best Money Can Provide in Education.” The school’s first principal, Matthew P. Gaffney, praised the building and its facilities, saying, “If Great Neck High School does not accomplish a great deal it is certainly not for lack of equipment.” Some of the school’s features remain today, but quite a few have disappeared. One never appeared: “On the balcony [of the auditorium] there are two motion picture projection rooms. An organ loft has been built in and while at present there is no provision for the installation of an organ, it may be done at any time with no alteration of the building.” The writer also reported, “In the tower is a room which will be used for school organizations, affording them privacy for their meetings... In the domestic science room there are six unit kitchens, spotless and shining, each with its own gas range, sink and household cabinet. There is a Frigidaire and laundry equipment, washing machine and mangle. In this unit is a complete three room and bath apartment, all ready to be furnished and decorated by the students.”

In a book about the Great Neck school system, *Lucky Seven*, published in 1964, the author says that despite the Depression, some students spoke of “a Mr. Chips feeling about everything,” with tweedy headmasters, walks in the ruins of the old Brokaw mansion behind the school, and lazy afternoons on the sheep meadow that later became Great Neck North Junior High. Some of the teachers remarked on the “rigidity” of the school system’s administration. “Great Neck then was not a liberal community,” one said, “and there wasn’t a great deal of freedom of expression in the schools, for teachers or for students.”

In 1929 the Great Neck School District 7 extended south only to Cutter Mill Road. In 1932, the district merged with Lakeville District 8. By 1936, the high school had 1,228 pupils, with space for only grades 8–12. In 1952, North Middle School opened, and in 1958 both Great Neck South High and Great Neck South Middle Schools opened. In 1970, Great Neck North High School was renamed in honor of retiring superintendent Dr. John L. Miller. From 1986–1989, major construction brought an expanded library and gym as well as renovations to the auditorium, science labs, and art, home economics, and industrial art facilities.