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The Story of Ashmont Hill: How Diverse Homeowners Developed Spirit and Self-Appreciation.

By Norman Janis

About the guest columnist: Norman Janis is a very proud resident of Ashmont Hill, Dorchester, about which he has written and spoken a considerable amount. He is a founding member of the Ashmont Hill Association. His highly personalized article can serve as an inspiration to other communities...

I was seven when my parents bought a big rooming house in a decaying seaside suburb of New York. It was rambling turn-of-the-century brown shingle structure, a former mayor's mansion, a challenge and a delight for a boy-explorer: Inglenooks, cellars, coalbins and other places to hide; big and little porches; mysterious back stairs that were now blocked off, and massive sliding doors that were now sealed shut. With my father's help, I tried to imagine how one might have lived in such a house when it was still whole, before it was a rooming house and before its balustrades and wicker chairs were thick with a half-century of yearly white paint.

In 1970, at age 29, I had been living for five years in a big, high-ceilinged, light-filled apartment above a store, in a seedy but pleasant part of East Cambridge. The rent was \$75. There was a big cultivatable yard, grape arbors over neighboring porches and driveways, and all sorts of ethnic foods to buy along the street. I would probably still be there, but the 'Harvard community' kept moving eastward. Rents were doubling and tripling. I decided to buy a house.

I had little money but grand ideas: My new dwelling would have to be cheap but also exciting to my imagination. This was a problem, but of a kind I enjoy trying to solve. My parents had managed an ocean view by renting out rooms in Rockaway Beach. I had found high ceilings over an Inman Square junk shop. Architectural romance need not always be expensive.

No one I knew was living in Dorchester in 1970. My impressions of the place were based on very little. I had passed through on the Expressway and seen rows of triple-deckers. One

summer I had worked nights hosing down ice cream trucks at a garage on Columbia Road. I had a vague idea from TV and newspapers that Dorchester was dangerous and decaying.

In looking for a house, I noticed the low Dorchester prices in the ads, but figured this meant lack of desirability. I continued to pursue architectural ecstasy in East Cambridge and Charlestown. Then, by some fluke of a real estate broker's mind, a Dorchester ad appeared one April Sunday which stressed, not plumbing, wiring and FHA financing, but 12 rooms with oak floors and oak reception hall.

Monday, I took a 15-minute subway ride from my downtown office to Ashmont and found my way to a nearby hilltop, where stood a very nice turn-of-the-century shingle and clapboard house. It had views of the Blue Hills to the South, the city skyline to the North, and the harbor to the East. It had nooks and bays, handsome oak front stairs, modest maple back stairs, and oak sliding doors that still worked. The whole hilltop seemed to be covered with houses like my Rockaway rooming house, but wonderfully intact and set in large well-tended gardens. The tree-lined street was clean and amazingly quiet. The MBTA and Dorchester Avenue traffic were just down the hill but could not be heard. I had somehow stumbled into a peaceful enclave of past time preserved.

I had found architectural romance.

Was there some horrible flaw in this bargain Brigadoon? For a week or two, I walked and drove through Dorchester streets, collected information at City Hall, and spoke to prospective neighbors. Clearly, there was a good deal of decay: houses abandoned or damaged by fire and not rebuilt, stores standing empty, tacky commercial structures obtruding into residential sections. But it was not worse than what I was used to. Probably anyone who grew up in Northeastern cities after World War II and who did not flee has come to terms with some degree of urban decay and may even regard it as part of his soul's comfort.

I heard the worst things about Dorchester from people who had never set foot there or had left in the centrifugal '50s. I heard moderately favorable or neutral things from people who lived there. Nobody said anything really good. I felt it was important for the ultimate well-being of this hilltop that its occupants know and say how pleasant it is to live there, but for the meanwhile, I could fill that in for myself. I bought the house.

It stands on Ocean Street. Partial views of the fairly distant harbor seemed to justify the name, though not overwhelmingly. But doubts about its rightness evaporated the first foggy day: I stepped out on the porch and smelled sea air and heard seagulls.

My new neighbors were diverse: Yankees and Poles; Irish Baptists and Episcopalians as well as Catholics; French-Canadians, Greeks and, what was new for me, quite a lot of Lithuanians. There were no Jews or blacks, but I did my part to make up the first lack (after a couple of years I had some help) and other people soon came along to make up the second.

Almost everyone was cordial and helpful, but they did not seem to form a cohesive community. Most had lived here for a long time and knew their neighbors, but they were making up their minds privately. There had been rioting and burning in Codman Square (very close by) a couple of years before, and the presumption was fairly heavy that fear was the chief common emotion, though there was not much talk even about that. Pride or pleasure in the

neighborhood were expressed guardedly, if at all. The future did not look bright; moving away was being considered seriously by many.

Romas and Rima Brickus, who lived next door, quickly became my friends. They had been on Ocean Street for a few years and knew no place they would rather live. But Dorchester's bad reputation exerted pressure on them through the opinions and advice of friends, and through fear that property in Dorchester meant financial loss someday. They had been looking at houses in Milton and Westwood, but they regarded my arrival as validation of their desire to stay: I had freely chosen to live here. Could we magnify the effect of that choice?

We thought the excited interest of a newcomer might infect others. We invited neighbors to a meeting at the Brickus house. I told how I had come to Ocean Street and how beautiful and special a place it seemed to me to be. I estimated that my house would cost three or four times as much in Cambridge or Brookline. I suggested that there were many people like myself in Cambridge and elsewhere who valued big, old houses and peaceful streets and nearness to the heart of the city, and who should know our neighborhood existed. This first meeting was in November 1970.

The response was good.

Our neighbors might actually have been waiting for someone to persuade them to be more optimistic. They would not allow themselves to be convinced, but they did listen and talk. We planned for future meetings but knew that we needed a focus.

The focus must be a positive one. Once Dorchester neighbors had begun to talk more freely with each other, the principal subject might be fear and the measures adopted, negative and defensive. We needed projects to generate pride and pleasure. By spring 1971 we had many ideas, and the best of them was simple: To make our neighborhood known. How to do that was simple, too, once we had thought of it, at any rate: A house tour.

The idea of a house tour was no great novelty in the world, of course, but in the vicinity of Ashmont Station it strained the imagination. Our neighbors, who had magnificent oak stairwells and marble fireplaces and stained glass windows and brass gaslight fixtures, said: "Who would want to come to Dorchester to look at OUR houses?"

Under the skepticism we detected a desire to be proved wrong. Our neighbors were cautious in word but cooperative in deed as we set about using a house tour to put the neighborhood on the map.

To be on a map you must have a name. The neighborhood topographically defined by our hill had been nameless. We called it 'Ashmont Hill' (an obvious choice, though I, as a linguist, had misgivings about the redundancy of '-mont' and 'hill.'). By fall 1971 the Ashmont Hill Association was meeting monthly, each time at a different house and planning a house tour for the spring.

We worked hard on that house-tour, challenged by our neighbors' friendly skepticism and the world's indifference. I began studying late 19th Century architecture: One needs to know if one is to show and tell. I discovered that architectural historian Vincent Scully had named a category to which the Rockaway rooming house and some Ashmont Hill houses belonged: the 'shingle style.' I wrote thousands of words: publicity fliers; a half-hour architectural historical lecture to accompany a slide show; a detailed tour-guide; press releases for the Dorchester

Argus-Citizen and any other newspaper that would use them. (They were not so receptive then. They also seemed to say, "Who would go to Dorchester to look at houses?"

I solicited help from Robert Rettig, then director of the Boston Landmarks Commission. He wrote a short paper "Background and Significance of Ashmont Hill, Dorchester," to be distributed at the tour. It narrated the real estate development of Ashmont Hill from 1870 on, and closed optimistically: "Today, Ashmont Hill survives remarkably intact from its original period. Now that houses of the 1890s, with their ample scale and their fine interior woodwork, are becoming popular again, there is hope that this neighborhood will retain its stability and will attract new residents who care about its architectural and environmental character. It can continue to be a source of pride to its residents and delight to its visitors." His hopeful statements were, in fact, a forecast.

The results of the house tour more than justified our efforts. Several hundred people came, from Dorchester, Boston, Maine and New Hampshire.

We heard architectural historians marvel at our houses and streets and praise our presentation; we heard people from other Dorchester neighborhoods say to each other: "We should be doing something like this!"

In the years since, we have seen Ashmont Hill televised, written up in guidebooks and cited by City Hall. We have played host to national Victorian Society tours and observed camera-laden Japanese tourists gazing curiously at our houses. We have watched other Dorchester neighborhoods follow our example, organizing and promoting themselves in positive ways. The Landmarks Commission is at present considering the designation of Ashmont Hill as an architectural conservation district. The name 'Ashmont Hill' has been picked up by real estate brokers and by the press. Dozens of people have knocked on our doors. They want to live here. Is there anything available to buy or rent?

For the neighborhood, there was a sense of triumph after the house tour. It gave us momentum as a community. The Ashmont Hill Association is still meeting monthly, each time at a different house and with a different chairman. We have had garage sales, a second house tour (1973) and June picnics; we have had confrontations with the Public Facilities Department, consultations with the MBTA about the Ashmont Station renovations, and good working relationships with the Station 11 police and with the Dorchester Little City Hall; we have had Christmas caroling and house concerts. This year, some people who were not yet here in 1973 are organizing a third house-tour: they missed the first two and feel deprived.

There is confident, open acknowledgment now on Ashmont Hill that we live in a good place.

It is a friendly place, too. Sometimes on spring afternoons the four-minute walk from Ashmont Station to my house takes an hour: Someone is working in a garden, I stop to talk. Others come along, soon people have clustered on the sidewalk, and then perhaps we walk a little further up the hill to see how someone else is doing. One could spend one's life on such a street.

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