

Art ^{AND} ARCHITECTURE

Destruction ^{AND} Preservation

By Victoria Crosby Photography by Jason Feinberg, Gary Lawrance



I am heartsick as I write about the demolition of yet another Gold Coast mansion. The photos you see are not from a time past. Its from the destruction of this magnificent home only a few months ago.

Inisfada, which means Long Island in Gaelic, was also known as the St. Ignatius Retreat House. It was sold by the Jesuits to a group of developers who will presumably build smaller Mansions.

Where is the sense of history, of beauty and art, in knocking down a unique and priceless structure that cannot be replaced? A group of concerned citizens, including members of SPLIA, the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, and many residents of Manhasset tried hard to prevent this tragedy, but alas, within several months of the purchase being finalized, the wrecker's ball demolished this magnificent mansion.

I was fortunate to have visited the mansion many times. One visit was shortly before it was demolished and I witnessed the empty room where St Genevieve's Chapel used to be. The altar, woodwork and stained

glass windows were preserved and the Jesuits' plan is for the chapel to be resurrected at Fordham University sometime in the future.

Some of the artifacts from Inisfada were auctioned off and some items were purchased by Martin and Millicent Carey who own, among other estates, the former Woolworth mansion in Glen Cove known as Winfield. The Careys are lovers of art and history and appreciate the great loss that the demolition of Inisfada is to Long Island's history.

Another history lover who purchased some items and has become a champion of Genevieve Brady, who once owned Inisfada, is Port Washington resident Chuck Idol. His interest transcends the actual building, but focuses more on the history and legacy that Mrs. Brady left to Long Island and the world. With her influence and financial support, she was responsible for Marie Curie's scientific research that led to X-ray technology. Mr. Idol has researched and compiled a collection of old articles and photographs and developed them into a book, which is available online as an e-book or in print.



Although some preservationists feel that if this knowledge were more widespread the mansion would not have been knocked down, others feel that for the right price, no amount of historical importance will keep certain developers from demolishing history. To paraphrase what one of the nuns told me, to them it is just a building and God's work will continue with or without it.

In contemplating what the response would have been if the Vatican was threatened with destruction, Richard Bentley, who had fought hard to preserve Inisfada, responded, "Based on the shameful Jesuit actions that focused more on cashing in their Inisfada property and a Village of North Hills Mayor Marvin Natiss, who saw no historical value in Inisfada and who chose to instead support so-called 'progress' of a new housing development on the land that both have led to Inisfada's demolition, an appropriate answer to your question is: It could depend on how much money the Jesuits are able to sell the Vatican property for."

Donald Trump was a perfect example of how finances overshadow historic and artistic importance when in 1980 he demolished the Bonwit Teller building on Fifth Avenue to build a tall tower with his name on it. Although preservationists tried to save the art deco bas-relief on the outside of the building, and Trump had at one time said he would donate them to a museum, he ultimately found it too costly to preserve them, so they were destroyed.

There is some good news regarding an historic mansion in England. Wentworth, the great country estate in Yorkshire that Catherine Bailey wrote about in her book *Black Diamonds* and I reviewed in 25A magazine's January/February issue, was purchased by British architect Clifford Newbold in 1999 for £1.5 million, or about \$2.5 million, from the previous owners. Perhaps the need for such extensive renovations scared many potential buyers away, as the price for the mansion and property seems like a bargain to me compared to \$39 million for Inisfada, which was in



great shape in comparison, and yet they still demolished it. Newbold, his wife and their three sons, Paul, Marcus and Giles, are in the process of restoring the building with the goal of eventually opening it to the public. Since much of the surrounding property was strip-mined, there is structural damage to parts of the house, in addition to it standing empty and boarded up for a long time. An interesting footnote to this is that Inisfada sold for \$39 million and was demolished, although of course it's historic value, the art and architecture of Inisfada was priceless.

Many Glen Cove mansions still stand, yet many were demolished to make way for houses, including Pembroke, as chronicled in Monica Randall's books and previous article in 25A, and by Gary Lawrance on his website, *Mansions of the Gilded Age* (garylawrance.blogspot.com).

While it is understandable the cost of owning, maintaining, renovating and restoring some of our historic mansions is not as easy financially today as it was for the people who built them, I think we all share the same hollow feeling when we see part of our unique history disappear and often without a trace. We are fortunate to live in an area that has consistently made history and it is our duty to help preserve it.

www.InisFada.org