

Cambria Heights – 222nd Street Historic District

Borough of Queens

Proposed Action: Propose for Calendaring August 10, 2021



The proposed Cambria Heights – 222nd Street Historic District is a remarkably cohesive group of 46 Tudor Revival row houses incorporating elements of the “Storybook” style. Framing 222nd Street between 115th Road and 116th Avenue in Cambria Heights, it was built by a single developer, Selective Homes Inc., in 1931-32 and remains exceptionally well-preserved.

Cambria Heights lies at Queens’ eastern edge, between Francis Lewis Boulevard and the Nassau County border. Located between the old villages of Queens to its north and Springfield to its south, it remained rural well into the 1920s. Far removed from train lines and other mass transit, Cambria Heights developed around the automobile, as work progressed on Robert Moses’ Long Island parkway network including the Southern State Parkway, which opened eastward from Cambria Heights into Nassau County in 1927. By 1930, an extensive parkway network was underway in Queens itself, including the Belt and Cross-Island Parkways, proposed in that year as part of a “metropolitan loop” of highways around New York City. These pioneering scenic highways, as well as the lure of suburban living, fueled a construction boom in and around Cambria Heights in the early 1930s despite the deepening Depression.

In planning 222nd Street for both residents and their automobiles, Selective Homes Inc. adapted a model first used extensively in Jackson Heights a few years earlier. Driveways behind the houses provide access to rear and basement garages, relegating automobiles to the interiors of the blocks and allowing for continuous front gardens.

The design of the houses combines the Tudor Revival with what has come to be known, in recent years, as the Storybook style. Originating in California in the 1920s, Storybook houses merged medieval and Arts-and-Crafts precedents with the aesthetics of fairytale illustrations and Hollywood stage sets. The fanciful adaptation of traditional Tudor elements, use of bright colors and exaggerated forms, and ornament with a playfully pasted-on appearance are characteristic of the Storybook style. The intact houses along both sides of 222nd Street are particularly imaginative examples of the Storybook style, with Tudor-arched window openings, bright terra-cotta roofs, brick facades with capriciously placed stone accents, and whimsically decorated chimneys with patterned brick and stucco. Typical of the style, the houses’ flat facades and the pasted-on quality of their gables, give the street a stage-set quality. Many houses retain their large first-story wood windows with cheerful pastel-colored diamond panes.

Begun in the spring of 1931, the houses began selling by that fall. Initially, residents were white middle-class families with men working in occupations such as accountant, train operator, printer, steamship clerk, mechanic, police officer, and sales agent. Black families began moving to Cambria Heights by the 1950s, often overcoming opposition, even hostility, from some white residents and real-estate brokers. By the 1980s, they were joined by immigrant families from Caribbean countries such as Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Barbados. Today, Cambria Heights remains one of several prosperous, predominantly African American and Afro-Caribbean residential communities in southeastern Queens, and the fancifully designed, remarkably intact, proposed Cambria Heights-222nd Street Historic District one of its architectural highlights.