



Before there was 150 Greenway Terrace, there was Block 12. This spot of land, located at the far east end of The Green, was once the focus of litigation drama. Before there was an apartment building, there was the Homes Company Sales Office, the Russell Sage Foundation headquarters for overseeing the planning, construction and sales of the recently new community of Forest Hills Gardens back in 1916. Photos of it indicate an architecturally boring structure akin to a giant shoe box with a door and some windows; a rather surprising element given the fact that The Gardens is one of the top studied planned communities among architects.

Along with the sales office there was also a house on Block 12. Its address was 101 Slocum Crescent and was the home of Austin Hanks and his family. It was Hanks who began the campaign to have additional single family homes built on this plot of land. He organized the Block 12 Corporation to raise money for its purchase. They even enlisted the services of Grosvenor Atterbury, the popular architect, who drew up a sketch of eight houses symmetrically positioned. But the efforts of the Block 12 Corporation were for naught. For whatever reasons, the residents were unable to purchase the property.

In 1922, due to budgetary constraints, the Russell Sage Foundation bailed out of its investment in the Forest Hills Project. They sold their financial interest to a group of Forest Hills residents and lot owners organized by John M. Demarest, the vice president and general manager of The Homes Corporation. Demarest followed Austin Hanks' quest to build homes on Block 12. But he too ran up against the final say so of the Russell Sage Foundation. Even though Block 12 was considered to be sold, it was only the Russell Sage Foundation's financial obligation that was sold. According to Robert W. De Forest, president of the Foundation;

"This sale in no respect changes the legal relation of property owners in Forest Hills Gardens to the Homes Company. These relations remain just what they always have been. It means nothing more than a change in the stock ownership of the Homes Company and transfers that stock from the Sage Foundation to Mr. Demarest and his associates."

Demarest ended up selling the property to the Harriss brothers one year later.

Robert and William Harriss came from a family well connected in politics and business. Altogether there were six brothers who over the years formed various successful corporations dealing in cotton and shipping.

Like the previous owner, The Harriss Brothers were also denied approval to build on Block 12. Unlike its previous owner, their intention was to build a three tower complex instead of a group of one-family homes. The apartment project was originally conceived by William L. Harriss. Grosvenor Atterbury along with Stowe Phelps and John Almy Tompkins were to design the structure.



It was Robert Harriss who made the apartment project a reality. Being a conservative politico, he made no bones about opposing FDR's New Deal proposal. Harriss also supported the controversial right

winger Father Coughlin, a 'radio priest.' While living in Forest Hills he headed up the Queens Recovery party and the local Democratic Group. He campaigned for Wendell Willkie in the 1940 Presidential Election and later for Douglas MacArthur in 1948. The legality of his Wall Street business was a favorite topic among newspaper columnists. Years after the completion of his apartment building, he was indicted for influencing the commodities market. The charges were later dropped. It was this type of fast talking that probably got him approval to finally build on Block 12 in 1934.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the Hanks house had fallen into neglect and disrepair. It became Forest Hills Gardens very own haunted house. No one dared to explore its inner sanctum. To add insult to injury, just when Harriss got the OK in 1933 to build, his apartment project was further stalled. Apparently the surviving owner of the old Hanks house was still alive. Harriss had no choice but to wait – for eight years. As the story goes, the second the old woman died, a construction crew showed up and without missing a beat, demolished the house and began digging the foundation for the new building.

Harriss commissioned one of his acquaintances, Stewart Wagner, an architect who, along with Albert Feillheimer, designed such award winning structures as Manhattan's long gone Beekman Movie Theater and the current CBS Broadcasting building, to construct the long awaited apartment building.

Construction was completed in 1942. Robert Harriss named his apartment building "The Leslie," in honor of his brother, William Leslie, who died suddenly several years earlier of a cerebral hemorrhage. How fitting since directly in front of the Leslie Apartments stood the flag pole that was presented by William Leslie Harriss at the 1917 Fourth of July ceremonies.

Architects considered the new apartment building "one of the most beautiful suburban garden apartments of its time." Ads boasted Long Island's new outstanding apartment saying:

"An Inspection Will be a Revelation in the Art of Better Living...Amidst an atmosphere of prestige and refinement...Accessible to the City, Country, Sea Shore and Gateway to Parkway Systems...located in the Center of Forest Hills Gardens...only 2 to 3 blocks from the new 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue Subway Station...Travel time to Manhattan is only twenty minutes by subway or motor."

Other features advertised the tiled promenade roof with its own sun deck and cupola roof garden. Recreation, sports and even a camera club room were available year round. Music was provided by MUZAK, thanks to "Special Radio Aerial Wiring." There was a Social Party Quarters for adult groups as well as indoor and outdoor playgrounds for children. All that plus 24-hour doorman service and burglary protection sounded like a pretty good deal for rentals starting at \$105 a month.

Some residents recall events that took place in The Leslie's basement during the early 50's. One was during Christmas Eve. Those who volunteered to be Santa Claus's helpers, as part of Forest Hills' traditional Christmas Eve program, would prepare for their evening rounds in the Social Quarters room. Another occasion, scheduled a week later, was the Bachelor's Cotillion, a New Year's Eve party for older teenagers. It was a catered dress up affair with live music.

That was then. Today, there are no remnants of the past in The Leslie's basement, except perhaps for the laundry room. The remaining rooms are now used for storage.

The Leslie isn't even called The Leslie any more, except by some of us old timers. The only hint of the apartment building's past name still proudly remains over the main entrance in gold script lettering.

As for any hints from the old Block 12 days and its haunted house, there's still one heirloom. The brick wall surrounding the property takes an interesting curve around a Sycamore Tree on the far west side on Slocum Crescent. For whatever reason, this area of the wall was built around the last remaining tree of Block 12. If trees could talk.

