

Landmarks Lion 2016 Nancy Pearsall

A native of Garden City, Long Island, Nancy Boden Pearsall received her Baccalaureate of Arts in History from Smith College. In 1956, she moved as a newlywed with her husband Otis Pratt Pearsall into the basement of a Greek Revival rowhouse on Willow Street in Brooklyn Heights. The couple quickly became active in the preservation of the neighborhood with the goal of rescuing Brooklyn Heights from destructive urban renewal policies and increasing real estate development pressure.

During the late 1950s, The Watchtower Society, which is run by the Jehovah's Witnesses religious organization, had been responsible for demolishing several properties in Brooklyn Heights in order to build an out-of-context apartment building for dormitory use. At the same time, municipal master builder Robert Moses' Slum Clearance Committee was planning to redevelop the northeast section of the neighborhood for the Cadman Plaza housing project.

Mrs. Pearsall and her network of neighbors sprang into action. Her fondest memories of this period included the time she spent working with architectural historian Clay Lancaster, who had been engaged by the newly-formed Community Conservation and Improvement Council (CCIC) to complete an architectural survey of Brooklyn Heights. Under his supervision, a detailed list of all of the 19th century houses in the community was compiled and a complete registry and map of the 1,200+ buildings in Brooklyn Heights was developed. This survey was later published in 1961 in book form as "Old Brooklyn Heights: New York's First Suburb," which is credited as a major contributor in securing protection for the neighborhood.

CCIC created two large maps, one color-coded by architectural style and the other by date of construction. These maps were used at meetings with city officials and neighborhood groups, and provided the perfect visual to showcase the rich architectural heritage of the neighborhood. Using these maps, CCIC and the Brooklyn Heights Association mounted a campaign of neighborhood defense against Moses' proposals. This led first to the enactment of a new limited-height zone for the neighborhood and eventually to the creation of the New York City Landmarks Law and the city's first designated historic district: Brooklyn Heights. These regulations are the two pillars that have protected the core of Brooklyn Heights from overdevelopment for over 50 years.

Mrs. Pearsall continues to be an active member of Brooklyn's preservation community to this day. She currently serves on the Board of the Brooklyn Historical Society and the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, and previously served on the Board of Trustees of Packer College Institute. Mrs. Pearsall is also a past President of the Junior League of Brooklyn.

Nancy Pearsall and her husband Otis have been dubbed the "Mother and Father of Brooklyn Heights" for their tireless commitment to their beloved neighborhood and borough. They purchased one of the oldest homes in the neighborhood, lovingly restored it and have spent many years there as a family. The resilience of her community – along with the legislation that protects it – is a fitting tribute to Mrs. Pearsall's legacy, and the Historic Districts Council is honored to present her with our 2016 Landmarks Lion Award in recognition of her lifetime of achievement.