

Historic Richmond Hill Photographs Rediscovered!

By Carl Ballenas
2020

A

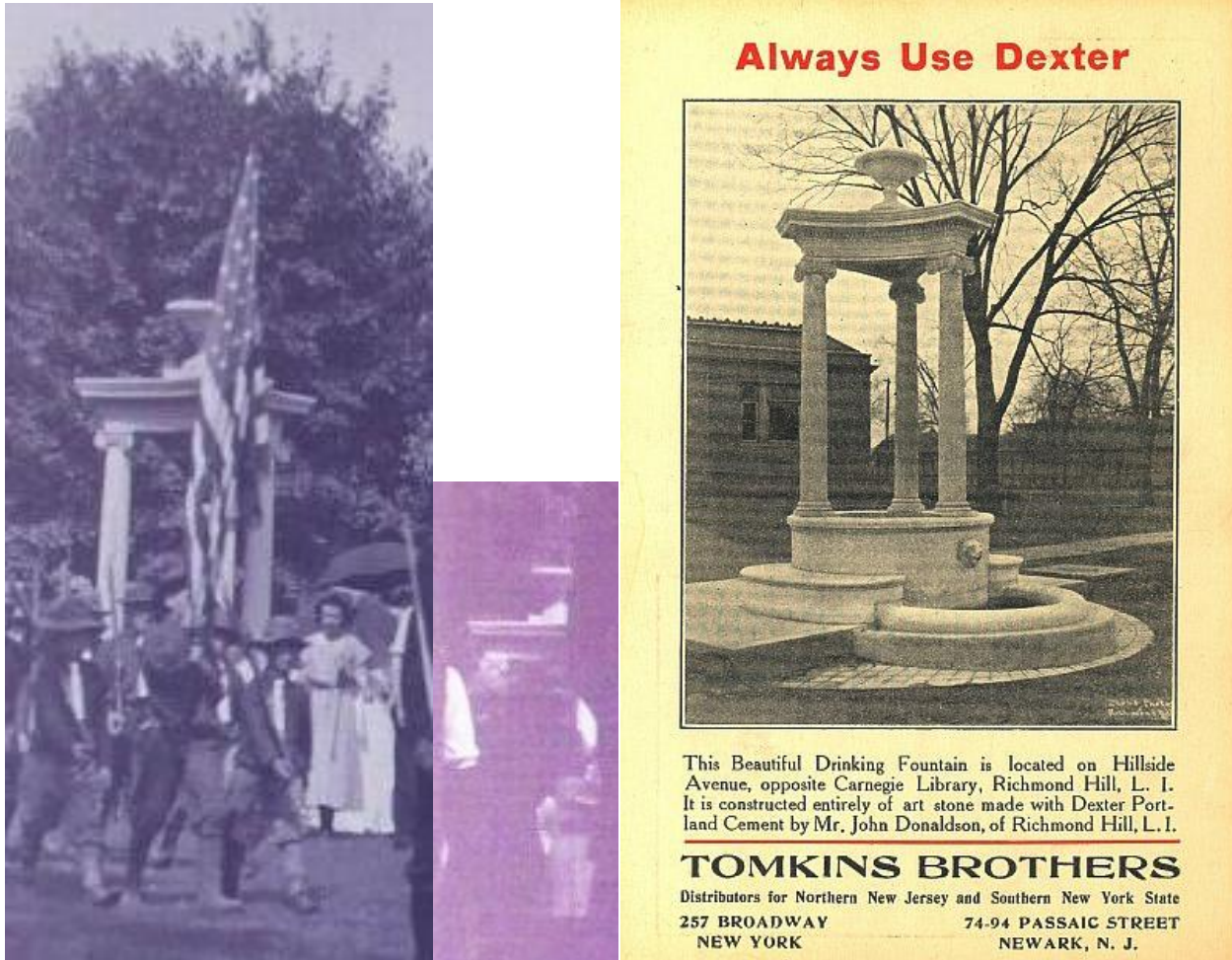


B

Two vintage photographs, showing an important historic event that took place in Richmond Hill 110 years ago, were recently rediscovered! The unknown photographer attended the July 4th, 1910 dedication of a new sixty-foot flagpole, that was erected for the town of Richmond Hill. A committee of local townspeople came up with this patriotic idea, raised the money, and conducted the dedication ceremony. The head of the committee and a major moving force was long time town resident Jacob Riis. The flagpole was located on the lawn in front of the Richmond Hill Library aligned next to Lefferts Blvd. This wide-open lawn space in front of the Richmond Hill Library was once known as Library Square and a focal point for many town events. The negatives for these images were stored away and later

misabeled. A slight connection to Jacob Riis had been retained but other facts about the images were invented and it was thought that the pictures were taken in the 1930s and showed some type of dedication ceremony at Riis Park in Far Rockaway. They were recently placed on eBay, but fortunately the truth about the photographs were discovered by a keen eye.

There were several clues in the photographs that leave little doubt these images were taken in Richmond Hill in 1910 and had been forgotten for over a century!



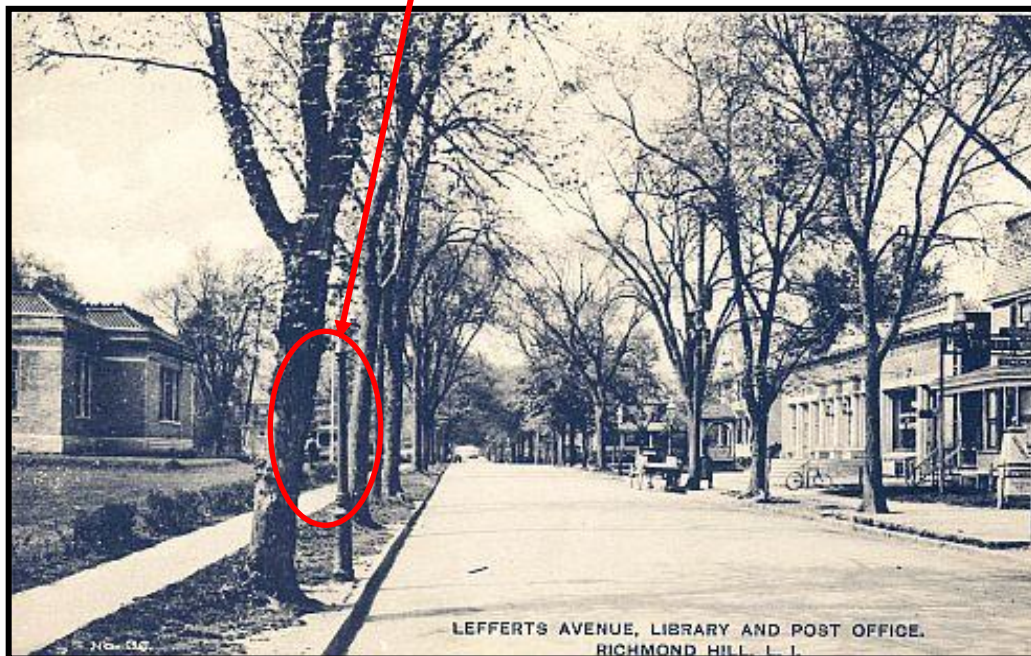
The first major clue to the identity of these photographs was the unique ornamental structure seen in both images. The top portion of the structure can be seen in both photos A and B. It is an exact match to a unique fountain structure that once stood in front of the Richmond Hill Library on Hillside Avenue.



The Richmond Hill Library was designed in the Greek Revival style and was formally opened on July 1, 1905. It was built through the generosity of millionaire and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. This early Richmond Hill postcard shows the library and fountain on Hillside Avenue.

In 1908, the Richmond Hill Twentieth Century Club erected the fountain in front of the library. This club was created during the Spanish-American War in 1898. The women of Richmond Hill banded together to help the war effort and made care packages for the soldiers. When the war ended after only four months, the women decided to form the Ladies' Twentieth Century Club. Their goal was to help improve the community of Richmond Hill. They hired young 24-year-old architect Beverly Robinson Jr. to design the fountain. Robinson, a graduate of Columbia University, would go to help work on the plans for the National Gallery of Art. Local contractor John Donaldson was commissioned to build the fountain using Dexter Art Stone cement. The fountain had a large central basin filled with water with a tin cup attached to one of the columns. This would serve the people of the community with fresh drinking water. There was a smaller basin at the bottom that was filled with water from a spout made in the shape of a lion's head with a large open mouth. This lower basin was for the use of the many horses that were used at this time. The large basin was surmounted by three narrow fluted ionic columns topped with a spiral, scroll-like ornamental capital. There was a large wide urn on the top and this served as a bird bath.

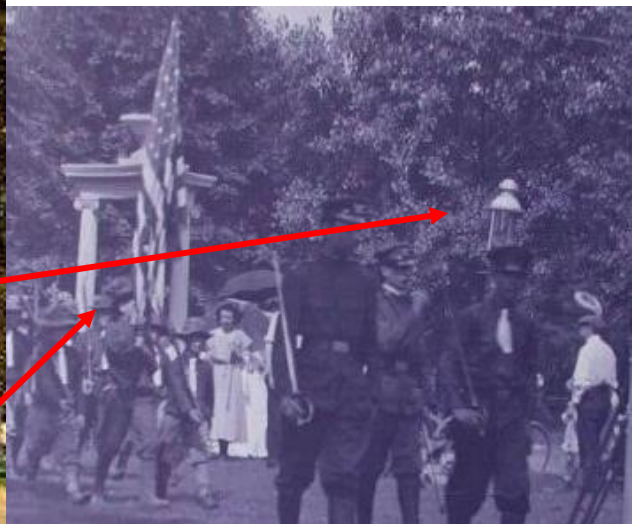
The Richmond Hill flagpole was dedicated in Library Square on July 4, 1910. There are no known photographs showing this flagpole. But a vintage Richmond Hill postcard of Lefferts Blvd looking north to Hillside Avenue offers a rare glimpse of the 1910 flagpole. If you look very carefully you can see the white painted flagpole in the postcard and there is even a man visible at the base of the flagpole, who might be raising the American flag on it.





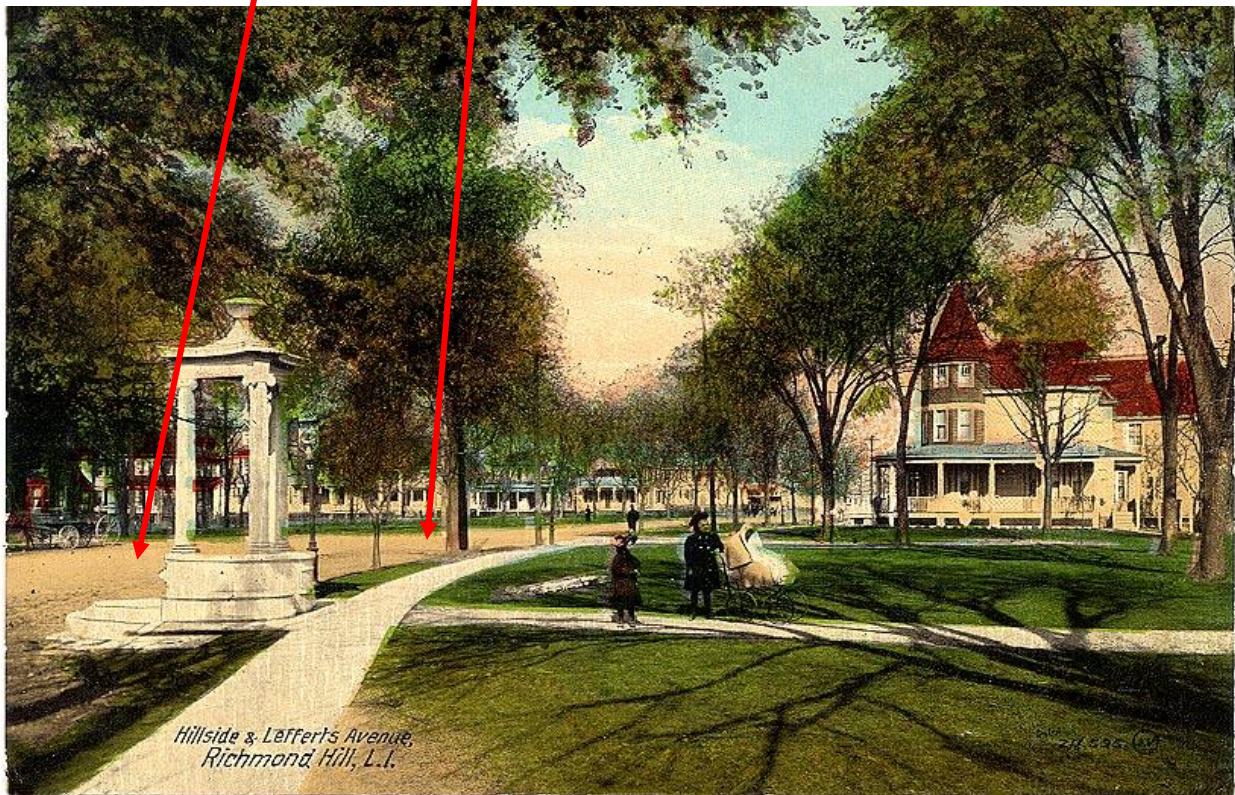
Another clue in the vintage postcard are the images of the old gaslight streetlamps that once surrounded the Richmond Hill Library. It is an exact match to the street gaslights seen in photographs A and B.

Further proof can be seen in another vintage Richmond Hill postcard, dated after 1908. This postcard shows a view of Hillside Avenue facing east. It features another view of the fountain and the lawn area in front of the Richmond Hill Library that was once known as Library Square. Clearly visible to the right of the fountain are one of the old street Gaslights. It can be seen in photographs A and B exactly where it should be and a perfect match.



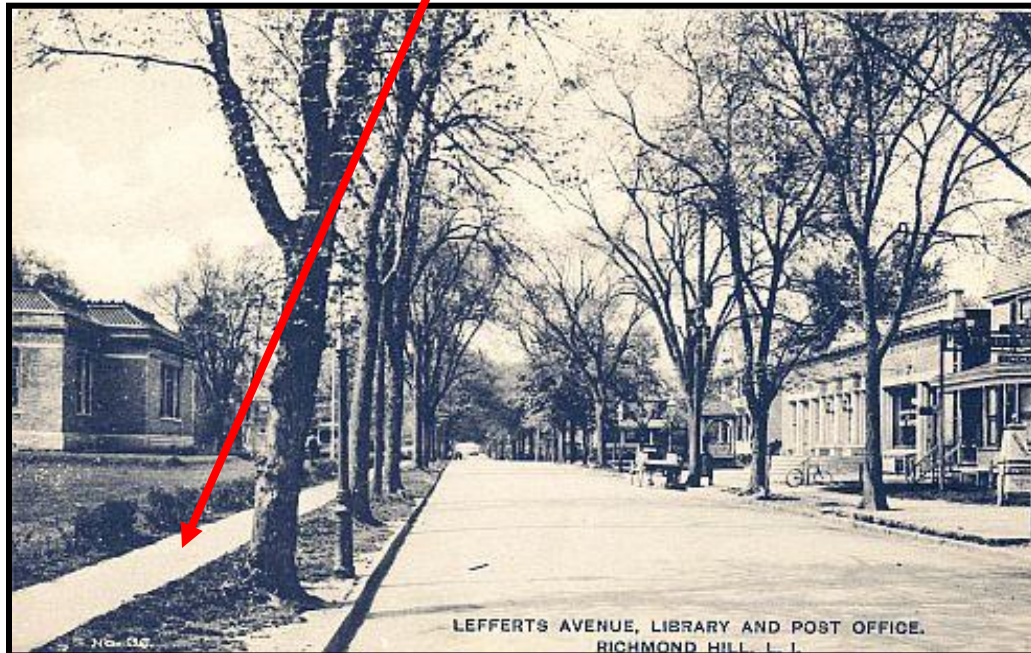


Another clue in photographs A and B are glimpses of Hillside Avenue. Behind the groups of young children with their bicycles, a portion of Hillside Avenue can be clearly seen.





In photograph B, the photographer has moved further back, and the sidewalk of the street can be seen. This sidewalk belongs to Lefferts Avenue (Now Lefferts Blvd.)



A full newspaper description of the 1910 event and the program was discovered by the Richmond Hill Historical Society on microfilm many years ago. The event was covered by a local newspaper, known as the ***Richmond Hill Record***.

There was an earlier newspaper article published on July 2, 1910 that gave a description of the preparations and the upcoming program. The flag raising ceremony took place on July 4, 1910. The text of the article offers more clues, but it contained no photographs.

RICHMOND HILL RECORD
Saturday July 9, 1910

FLAG RAISING

Flag and Pole Given to Richmond Hill Library.

Most Enjoyable Ceremonies Participated in By Big Assemblage of Patriotic People.

By Frank M. Marlow

A more beautiful site than that of the flag presentation on the morning of the Fourth of July at Library Square was never witnessed in this place. Blue sky above, green foliage below, public buildings and residences, the holiday attire of the throng and the library building in the background made up a picture long to be remembered.

Grouped around the flagpole were members of Wood Post G. A. R., and Tilley Camp, Spanish War Veterans of Jamaica, and Mansfield Post of Brooklyn, and in the assemblage were members of the G. A. R. and Sons of Veterans. A charming scene was the company of young ladies of Public School No. 90, on Washington Avenue, dressed in white, with red, white and blue sashes, who stood "attention" in the form of a star, the veterans standing inside of the star. They were directed by Principal John A. Loope and Miss Gertrude Riis, but they had little to do, as the young ladies entered heartily into their part and were thoroughly drilled.

Promptly at 10 o'clock the band paraded through several of the adjacent streets and on reaching the library lawn the exercises began. Rev. Joshua Kimber offered prayer, after which Jacob A. Riis made the presentation speech as follows:

Fellow Citizens! You have heard the children's pledge, and you have seen the flag raised by veteran hands, which, if they tremble today, was steady as fate itself when they bore it forward, until peace was won for the land and freedom for all men forever. They did their duty as men. Shall we do less? They were ready to die for their country. Shall not we, all of us, be willing to live for it? The flag they fought under is the same flag that flies over our City Hall and the State House at Albany. Our Governor bids us never forget it.

Last winter I went over two historic battlefields, dear to all Americans. I saw Valley Forge buried deep in snow and understood then as never before what a price was paid for our country, in blood and tears. I rode over the battlefield of Gettysburg and they showed me the spot where the Irish Brigade knelt as it went into action while Father Corby gave the men absolution and, as they rose to their feet, cried out: "Any man who is found shot in the back today will not be given Christian burial," I saw the spot where the color-bearer of the German Regiment fell, and, dying, held up the flag until the last drop of life-blood had ebbed from his veins. And the turnpike crossing where that first day's whirlwind of battle found a young American guarding the standard, who refused to retreat when his regiment fell back before overwhelming odds. And when they sent him word to hasten and bring the colors back to the regiment, he flashed out: "Tell them to bring the regiment back to the colors." And he fell where he stood.

These were Americans, wherever their cradles were rocked, and this is their country, our country, whatever tongue they spoke before they made their homes with us.

Our country, one language, one flag!" The old days are passing God alone knows what the future has in its keeping. But while we remember that pledge, our beloved country is safe.

On behalf of the citizens of our community, I present this flag to the Richmond Hill Library to be the rallying point of our people in days that are bright and in days when clouds are gathering. To you,

Captain Graves, and you, veterans who bore it high in battle, we leave as a sacred trust the guarding of it while you live. You children of today who hold the destiny of tomorrow, I charge that you keep it forever clean and spotless. God keep us all in the endeavor!

Mr. Riis was eloquent, and his words rang out so clearly that everyone was able to hear him. He held the close attention of the vast assemblage and at the conclusion of his remarks received ringing applause. As soon as Mr. Riis concluded his address Orlow W. Graves pulled the rope holding the ball of flag to the top of the flagpole, where it loosened and the breeze caught up the folds, unfurling it to the throng below, which after a moment of admiration greeted it with enthusiastic handclapping. The band struck up "The Star-Spangled Banner," and led by Mr. Strana the assemblage joined in the refrain.

Trustee John A. Loope accepted the flag on behalf of the library in a few well-chosen words.

The young ladies of Public School No/ 90 then saluted the flag and recited the pledge to the flag, after which the rest of the exercises were conducted at the library steps, under the direction of Major James A. Bell. The Declaration of Independence was read by Stephen Fordham in masterly style; after which Miss Laura Haugaard read "Lincoln's Address at Gettysburg." Miss Haugaard is really an elocutionist and her words were so clearly pronounced and the sentences so emphatic that she held the assemblage spellbound. The oration was delivered by ex-Senator John S. Crosby of Missouri. It was an excellent address and punctuated with wit. The speaker dwelt at some length on the equality of man, equal in opportunity and equal in his relation to the state. He spoke on the progress the nation is making in political economy, in inventions and scored men who become so set in their ways that they do not welcome innovations, improvements or enterprise. He referred to Jefferson as the greatest statesman in American history in his opinion.

The benediction was pronounced by the Rev. A. C. Bunn. The assemblage then dispersed and the most patriotic and enjoyable ceremonies that ever took place in Richmond Hill were concluded. The police arrangements under Captain Baldwin were excellent.

The committee in charge was Jacob A. Riis, chairman; Major Jas. A. Bell, secretary; Joel Fowler, treasurer; F. W. Mar, G. A. W. Brown, W. H. Bunn, Thos. Coates, Thos. Ford, Wm. Welner. A. C. Hankins, Jacob Riis, A. Quortrup.

Jacob Riis was Richmond Hill's most famous resident and is featured prominently in the July 9 article which includes his entire speech. Jacob immigrated to the United States in 1870 from Denmark. He was a noted reporter, author and photojournalist for the New York Evening Sun. He was among the first photographers to use flash powder which enabled him to photograph the interiors and exteriors of the slums of New York City at night. His most popular book, *How the Other Half Lives* published in 1892, became a pivotal work that precipitated much needed reforms and made him famous. Jacob's photography, used to help him document the plight of the poor, made him an important figure in the history of documentary photography. The book was seen by Theodore Roosevelt who offered his help, creating a lifelong friendship between the two men. Jacob married his childhood sweetheart, Elisabeth, and eventually moved to Richmond Hill where they raised a family.

The invocation on that day was given by Rev. Joshua Kimber who was the founding pastor of the first church erected in Richmond Hill, the Church of the Resurrection, and a veteran of the Civil War. At this 1910 time-period he was no longer the rector of the church, but he did live in the community.

Orlow Graves, who unfurled the flag, was a longtime Richmond Hill resident having purchased a considerable amount of land in the 1870s living near 115th Street and Myrtle Avenue. He was also a veteran from the Civil War.

The article states that grouped around the flagpole were members of Wood Post G. A. R., and Tilley Camp, Spanish War Veterans of Jamaica, and Mansfield Post of Brooklyn, and in the assemblage were members of the G. A. R. and Sons of Veterans. The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was a fraternal organization composed of veterans of the Union Army (United States Army), Union Navy (U.S. Navy), Marines and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service who served in the American Civil War. In the close-up of the photograph A we can see a group of four men to the right of the flagpole. It is believed that among them are Jacob Riis, Rev. Kimber and Mr. Graves. The image is not sharp enough to make an exact identification, but it is believed that the third figure is Jacob Riis. The speech given by Jacob Riis focuses on the Civil War and the veterans from that war. Mr. Orlow Graves, a veteran of the Civil War was given the honor to raise the large American flag for the first time on the new flagpole.



In the July 2nd article it states that there would be forty-eight female students from PS 90. The number was precise because they were representing the forty-eight stars found on the American flag in 1910. In both photographs we see a variety of people and among them a number of young ladies.

Over time the fountain was dismantled and carted away, and the gas lights gave way to more modern electric light fixtures. There is no record as to what happened to the flagpole but by the turn of the century it was gone.

The Richmond Hill Historical Society has been keenly interested in making the local history of Richmond Hill come alive and in 2003, President Nancy Cataldi came up with the idea to replace the missing flagpole and she wanted to recreate the 1910 ceremony! The Library gave their approval and funds were raised to purchase a new flagpole and a granite marker was placed at the base of the flagpole. The flagpole could not be placed in the exact location but was placed on the other side of library entrance. Nancy also had the idea to create a Historical Essay and Oratorical Contest for the dedication of the new flagpole. The day selected was Flag Day, Saturday, June 14, 2003. The fence around the library was draped with American flags.



Diane Freel, Nancy Cataldi and Ivan Mrakovcic
of the Richmond Hill Historical Society 2003
All were Presidents of the Richmond Hill Historical Society

Along with the 2003 photographs of the new flagpole erected and dedicated by the Richmond Hill Historical Society we now have images of the 1910 dedication of the first Richmond Hill Flagpole.

Elizabeth Riis, Orlow Graves, a friend of Jacob Riis and member of the 1910 flagpole committee, August Quortrup along with Nancy Cataldi and Ivan Mrakocic are all buried in Maple Grove Cemetery.



Jacob and Elisabeth Riis 1900