**S. Jaffe 4/12/15 Higgins family report, Brooklyn Historical Society**

Immigrant, inventor, manufacturer, civic activist, historian, freethinker, philanthropist, husband, and father, Charles Michael Higgins (1854-1929) played many roles in 19th and early 20th-century Brooklyn. An empassioned writer, his pamphlets and letters to editors reveal a mind eager to grapple with and master a wide range of economic, political, medical, philosophical, historical, and urban questions. His biography, like that of his wife Alexandrina Fransioli Higgins (c. 1871-1955), illuminates how newcomers made a life for themselves and shaped the economic, social, and cultural worlds of Brooklyn as it became one of the largest cities and most important industrial centers in 19th-century America and then a borough of the nation’s (and by 1925) the world’s largest metropolis, Greater New York City. If Brooklyn shaped Charles and Alexandrina Higgins and their children Tracy, Rachel, and Lisbeth, the Higginses in turn left their mark on Brooklyn’s economy, finances, culture, transit infrastructure, historical memory, social services, and public sphere.

**Charles Michael Higgins**

Charles Michael Higgins was born in Mullock Brah (Mullaghbrack), Mohill, County Leitrim, Ireland. His father was Dennis Higgins, about whom little seems to be known. His mother was Rachel Elizabeth Tracy Higgins (1813-1901), the daughter of Charles Flanagan Tracy of Athlone, “a distinguished surgeon, scholar and athlete” according to her obituary. As a girl in Ireland, Rachel Elizabeth Tracy enjoyed educational advantages connected to her middle-class upbringing. According to her granddaughter Rachel Everson, Charles M. Higgins “always told me [that she] was well educated and had attended some classes at Trinity College in Dublin, altho I tried but found no records there of her or her brother.” Rachel Elizabeth Higgins would be the mother of eight children, the first three of whom were triplets, two of whom died before “maturity.” Only two of her children, Charles M. Higgins and Marguerite Higgins Gianella, were still living in 1900. (See Images 1-6 in accompanying Image document.)[[1]](#endnote-1)

Rachel Elizabeth Higgins immigrated to New York City in either 1858 (the date stated in the 1900 Federal Census) or 1860 (the date stated in her record at the New York Emigrant Savings Bank in August 1862, and therefore probably the accurate date). According to Rachel Everson, Charles himself came to America at age six accompanied by a brother and a sister, who had been preceded across the Atlantic by their parents, an example of the “chain migration” common among 19th-century immigrants. The savings bank record describes “Rachel Higgins” as a housekeeper, of 464 Columbia Street in Brooklyn, married to Dennis Higgins. Only four children are listed: Mary Josephine (age 17 and probably the oldest child present), Joseph W., Michael, and “Margaret.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

In the bank record Rachel stated that she had arrived in 1860 on the screw steamer *Circassian.* This iron-hulled vessel was one of the “Powerful Steam Ships” of the Atlantic Royal Mail Steam Navigation Company, shuttling between Galway City and New York, with one stop at St. John’s, Newfoundland. An 1860 ad in the Dublin *Freeman’s Journal* for the steamship line boasted that this was “The Shortest and most direct route to America.” The *Circassian* would later be captured by the Union Navy while trying to supply the blockaded South in 1862 during the Civil War; she would serve the Union as a supply ship for the war’s duration (see Image 7.)[[3]](#endnote-3)

Despite some slight informational discrepancies (the bank record lists Rachel’s birth year as 1817, not 1813), this appears to be the family of Charles M. Higgins. His absence from the record might be explained in one of two ways: either he was in fact the “Michael” listed, due to a clerical mistake (Michael was his middle name), or he was away from the household at the time. That Charles Michael Higgins was not always present is confirmed by the fact that his mother, who “taught school in Brooklyn,” sent him as a boy to Guilford, Connecticut for about a year “to ride a plow horse for a Mr. Leete.” In Higgins’s memory, he was too small to ride the large horse, so instead “Mr. Leete brought him home to be a companion for his son.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

The first years in America were turbulent ones for the Higgins family. Dennis Higgins died not long after arrival. According to a 1929 obituary for the ink manufacturer in the Brooklyn *Times*, Joseph Higgins, Charles’s older brother, joined the Union Army as a drummer in 1864 and never returned. As Rachel Everson remembered, “no official report was ever received by the family.” Several of the surviving family members remained in close contact. In 1880, in fact, Charles Higgins, a 25-year-old single Irish-born “lawyer” (in reality a patent solicitor) was living at 411 Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn with his 66-year-old Irish-born mother, “Elizabeth Higgins,” and his two Irish-born sisters, 21-year-old “Margueritta”, who was single, and 36-year-old Mary Stratford, who was married (and who was presumably the “Mary Josephine” noted in the 1862 bank record).[[5]](#endnote-5)

Higgins remained close to his sister Marguerite (the Margaret and Margueritta of the earlier records), who married Swiss immigrant John Gianella in May 1884. Higgins was one of the signing witnesses of the marriage; a year later, in May 1885, Higgins and Gianella would go into business partnership together (see below). Rachel Higgins would continue to live in the household of her son as he moved to 212 Smith Street (where they lived in 1884) and then 499 Fourth Street (by 1894). In 1900, the household consisted of Rachel and Charles M. Higgins, mother and son, and two Irish-born single women, Mary A. Kraus and Annie Healy, as servants. Rachel died at 499 Fourth Street in October 1901.

**Higgins’s Career**

Accounts describe Higgins as “self-taught” and “self-educated” as a draftsman, chemist, and inventor. By the mid or late 1870s Higgins was working for A. E. Fraser, a Brooklyn resident who had a business as a patent solicitor under the name of Burke & Fraser at 37 Park Row in Manhattan. Patent solicitors served as agents for inventors, being paid to register inventions with the U.S. patent office in Washington and to take care of other legal and clerical business associated with patenting new devices and industrial processes. In an era when Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, the telegraph, the steam engine, and the factory were transforming American life, newspapers and city directories were replete with ads for Archer’s Patent Adjustable Barber’s Chair, the National Patent Steam Carpet Cleaning Company, Giuseppe Tagliabue’s Patent Coal Oil Pyrometer, C. Worch’s Patent Moth Destroying Apparatus, and many others.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Possession of a patent proclaimed exclusive ownership of a marketable innovation, the maker’s confidence and pride in a product that could compete with others for consumer preference, and a faith in American ingenuity. Lower Manhattan, with its access to Wall Street investment capital, the nation’s foremost publishing and journalistic firms on and around Park Row, and specialized industrial production, was a national center for the patent-securing business. In 1877, at least 27 patent agents had offices downtown—seven listing Brooklyn as their place of residence-- and many of them employed staffs of assistants, clerks, and draftsmen such as Higgins. (By contrast, the 1878 *Lain’s Directory of Long Island*, which covered Brooklyn and other Kings County professional and business listings, did not contain a single listing for a patent solicitor or agent.) These men were part of the “army” of white collar businessmen and employees who daily trooped back and forth across the East River, taking the ferries on the Fulton Street, Main Street-Catherine Street, Montague Street-Wall Street, Atlantic Avenue-Whitehall Street, and Williamsburg, Greenpoint, Red Hook, and South Brooklyn routes between home and work, especially in the years before the Brooklyn Bridge opened in 1883.

By 1878 Higgins had moved to the firm of S. H. Wales & Son, patent solicitors and also publishers of *The Scientific News*, at 10 Spruce Street. The firm had its roots in the earlier firm of Munn & Company (Munn, Wales & Beach), publishers of *The Scientific American* and patent solicitors at 37 Park Row, in the building where Higgins had been working previously for Fraser. At Wales & Son, Higgins, according to his colleague John E. Gavin, worked as “a Patent Specification writer and Patent Office draftsman… the drawings being illustrations of new inventions… submitted to the Patent Office at Washington.” Gavin copied “into legible long hand Mr. Higgins’ original rough drafts of the Patent Specifications” for submission to Washington. According to Rachel Everson, Higgins also worked for a time as a reporter for the firm’s *Illustrated Scientific News*. After S. H. Wales & Son was sold and absorbed back into Munn & Company, Higgins set out on his own as an independent patent solicitor, first in a small office at 10 Spruce Street and then in a larger office in the new Temple Court Building at 5 Beekman Street, with John E. Gavin as his assistant in both places. Rachel Everson later recounted that “two thick bound volumes contain the patents he secured for his clients during a period of eight years.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

**Chas. M. Higgins & Co.**

Higgins’s interest in patents, however, was also more personal. As early as 1874 he patented a window screen he had invented “for the exclusion of insects from the apartments of dwellings.” In 1875 and 1876 he patented two devices for the manufacture of footware, a “leather screw pegging machine” and “pegs for boots and shoes,” but in both cases he assigned the patent to a fellow Brooklynite, Kenan O’Brien, meaning presumably that he sold all rights to the inventions to O’Brien (see Images 8-14.) His most significant creation, however, was the black ink he experimented with in his Brooklyn home by 1880 while he continued as a patent solicitor. As Gavin recalled, Higgins was “trying to invent and produce a liquid black drawing ink to take the place of the Chinese Stick or ‘India’ Ink (so-called) then in vogue**.”** The family tradition, passed down by Rachel Everson, was that Higgins collaborated with his sister Marguerite and her future husband John Gianella in inventing a new ink; as Everson later put it, “I have a mind’s eye picture of father, his sister and her husband, experimenting on making a liquid India ink in a little back room somewhere in Brooklyn.” Higgins’s American Drawing Inks, Eternal Ink, and other brand lines would follow later (See Images 15-17).[[8]](#endnote-8)

In May 1885 Higgins entered a partnership with his brother-in-law John Gianella as “Chas. M. Higgins & Co., manufacturers of Inks and Adhesives.” According to the 1892 New York State Census, John Gianella shared his household in Brooklyn’s 22nd Ward with his wife, their three children, and Frank Gianella, his brother; both men worked in “Inks” with Higgins. The formal partnership lasted for ten years, and John Gianella then retired. Higgins continued concurrently as a patent solicitor until 1888, when he sold that business to Arthur C. Fraser, another tenant of the Temple Court Building and son of Higgins’s early employer A. E. Fraser.[[9]](#endnote-9)

At the time Higgins sought to perfect his own liquid India ink, other liquid black inks already existed. They were being sold in London, for example, during the 18th century, and in New York City by 1803. The history of specialized ink manufacturing and brand marketing in the New York City area dated at least as far back as 1824, when Thaddeus Davids founded his firm at 222 William Street in lower Manhattan, where he produced his “Steel Pen Ink” (a tanno-gallate of iron ink) in 1827 and a “chemical writing fluid” (using indigo, logwood, and fustic for coloring) in 1833; the firm was still in existence in 1941.

In an era when mass production, advertising, and distribution by railroad and steamship favored forward-looking and ambitious businessmen committed to marketing competitive brand products, Charles Higgins’s inks gained wide sales and use. David N. Carvalho, author of *Forty Centuries of Ink* (1904), maintained that in 19th-century America “the legitimate industry included over 300 ink makers.” He included Higgins in a list of the 35 “best known” American inks during the 19th century. Higgins was also one of the eight “leading ink manufacturers of the world” to whom Carvalho devoted a brief extended description: “Charles M. Higgins of Brooklyn, N. Y., in 1880 commenced the manufacture of ‘carbon’ inks for engrossing, architectural and engineering purposes, and has succeeded in producing an excellent liquid ‘Indian’ ink, which will not lose its consistency if kept from the air. It can also be used as a writing ink, if thinned down with water.” Higgins’s own background as a patent draftsman had sparked his interest in improving inks for artists and professional draftsmen; the firm’s inks would consistently be marketed to artists through retail art supply stores and department stores as well as to ordinary stationery store consumers and students (see Images 18-26).[[10]](#endnote-10)

Another series of popular Higgins products was the firm’s adhesive pastes. By 1900, the manufacturer was marketing “Higgins’ Photo Mounter,” “Higgins’ Drawing Board and Library Mucilage,” and “Higgins’ Taurine Mucilage” (see Images 27-30). Rachel Everson later remembered that “the white paste looked so good and smelled so fine anxious parents often called to say a child had eaten it, what should they do. I can remember my older brother, younger sister, and me playing with round yellow paste jar labels, pretending they were money, and then we wondered how much money Father had. My conclusion at the age of 5 was ‘about $500’!”[[11]](#endnote-11)

**Park Slope**

By 1888 Higgins and Gianella had “built a small two story factory” at 168-170 Eighth Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues to produce their ink. (These building numbers today fall between Third and Fourth Avenues, so the buildings must have been renumbered later.) Late 19th-century Brooklyn was a bustling industrial city, and Higgins’s plant joined hundreds of others. By 1880, Brooklyn was the fourth-largest producer of manufactured goods in the country, following New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. It was the site of over 100 iron foundries, produced over half of the nation’s sugar, was the nation’s third-largest glass manufacturer, and was home to scores of oil refineries and factories that made pencils, hats, beer, books, chemicals, drugs, pottery, cakes, clocks, shoes, machinery, and countless other goods.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In 1897, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* proudly trumpeted the city’s ingenuity and entrepreneurial acumen by reporting that 22 Brooklyn residents had recently gained U.S. patents for everything from trusses and type finishing machines to folding beds and luggage carriers for bicycles. Indeed, between 1890 and 1901 Higgins himself would receive 26 patents for processes, formulas, and devices he used in his business, including “printing or stamping ink” in 1890, “mucilage and adhesive compound” in 1891, “bottle for mucilage, &c.” and two more ink formulas in 1892, a “bottle cap and brush” in 1896, an “adhesive” in 1897, an “ink stand or bottle” and a “cap and brush for bottle” in 1898, a “bottle cap and stopper” in 1900, and a “jar or bottle closure,” a “collapsible can or tube,” a “brush,” and a “bank check, &c., and fabric for making same,” all in 1901. As he explained in his patent application, the aim of the latter invention was to “render alteration of the writing of the check either by mechanical erasure or chemical manipulation difficult or impossible” (see Images 31-43). In his successful application for a patent for “printing or stamping ink” in 1890, Higgins claimed to have made an industrial breakthrough, discovering that oleic acid (found in various animal and vegetable fats and oils) was superior to glycerine, the usual base used in typewriting and ticket-printing inks, in that oleic acid was less sensitive than glycerine to temperature changes that made such inks too dry or too liquid.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Park Slope, where Higgins and Gianella located their factory, was not as crowded with industrial plants as were other parts of Brooklyn, especially those facing the East River. By the 1850s the area did have lumber yards and other industries served by the nearby Gowanus Canal. Landowner Edwin C. Litchfield had plans (never completely fulfilled) to develop a full-fledged manufacturing district in the South Slope. Meanwhile he, New York merchant William B. Cronyn, and other moneyed gentlemen built free-standing country mansions for themselves in what is now the North Slope. The creation of Prospect Park during the 1860s confirmed the identity of the North Slope as a district of new elite townhouses and upper middle-class family row houses. (Indeed, Higgins and his family would make the neighborhood their home; by 1888 he was living at 197 Ninth Street, near his factory.) The more southerly part of the Slope toward the canal became a more mixed district of working-class and middle-class housing, workshops, and retail businesses.

New transit lines opened the district to middle-class commuters, immigrant laborers, and Brooklyn businessmen like Higgins intent on having transport conduits to the harbor and to Manhattan (via ferries and later the Brooklyn Bridge). Horse car lines such as those on Flatbush Avenue (1860) and Seventh Avenue (which switched to electricity in 1893) urbanized the neighborhood. Higgins Ink joined a select group of manufacturers in the district, including the Ansonia Clock Company on Seventh Avenue between 12th and 13th Streets (1879-1929), which advertised itself as the “Largest Clock Factory in the World” and employed some 1,500 workers, most of them Irish and Polish immigrants.

Higgins was successful in this industrial city, and sales of his India Ink encouraged him to expand operations. In 1898 he bought a plot of land including the Second Empire-style “old mansion” (still standing) at 271 Ninth Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues built in 1857 as the home of banker William Cronyn (see Image 44). Through this purchase Higgins also acquired the adjacent ground of what became 273-277 Ninth Street running through to Eighth Street, and on this lot he built a five-story factory in 1898, while turning the mansion into an office complex. This building also still stands at 240 Eighth Street (see Image 45). In 1899, the ink company’s official address was still listed as 168 Eighth Street; by 1911 the headquarters was being listed as 271 Ninth Street, and was advertised as such on company envelopes (see Image 46).[[14]](#endnote-14)

Rachel Everson later recalled that “as a very little girl I was proud that my father was Irish. Our household help was almost invariably Irish and most of the office and factory employees.” Indeed, a 1927 testimonial plaque given by the firm’s employees as a gift to Charles M. Higgins bears out the heavily Irish identity of his workforce. Of 48 employees, 23 bore distinctly Irish names (Gallagher, O’Connor, Degnan, Phelan, Ryan, and so on); others with traditional Anglo-Saxon names may have also been Irish-American. Three others bore German surnames, three had Italian names (one of them was John Gianella, Jr.), and one employee had a Polish surname (see Images 47 and 48).[[15]](#endnote-15)

Twenty of the employees were women; if later evidence is any indication, they worked as packers, preparing boxes of merchandise for shipment, and as receptionists and stenographer-typists. Men most likely filled the firm’s clerkships and production floor jobs as well as working with women as packers. On the staff were two Ryans, two McPhersons, and two O’Connors, suggesting that spouses or family members may have worked side by side or at least near each other. The firm was a “family business” in a more literal sense as well: In addition to employing his nephew John Gianella, Jr., Higgins also employed his son Tracy and his son-in-law Alfred H. Everson (who was a company vice president by 1930). Other staff members were virtual “family”: John E. Gavin, whose signature headed the testimonial, had known Higgins since 1878 or 1879 and worked for him as general manager from the 1880s until retiring in 1924. Although Gavin was born in Massachusetts, his parents had both been born in Ireland.

Higgins marketed and distributed his product lines across the country from his Brooklyn headquarters and factory. Retailers often advertised the brand, aware that the company’s name recognition and reliable product quality could drive sales. By 1892, for example, the Siegel-Cooper department store’s “artists’ materials department” promoted Higgins American India Ink at 22 cents per bottle in its display ad in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. During the mid and late 1890s, department stores and other retailers in Sacramento, San Francisco, Chicago, and Atlanta were advertising “Higgins Drawing Ink, All Colors,” “Higgins water proof ink,” and “Higgins ink and other draughtsman’s supplies” in major metropolitan newspapers serving their regions. Between 1900 and 1915, Higgins supplies were being sold in Philadelphia; Decatur, Illinois; Lawrence, Kansas; Portland, Oregon; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Corsicana, Texas; Ottawa, Ontario; and Fairbanks, Alaska, as well as many other places (see Images 49-53). Higgins had created a national as well as Canadian market for the wares of his Park Slope plant. The firm also expanded across the Atlantic: by 1900, Higgins had sales “departments” in London as well as in Chicago. So recognizable did the brand become that in January 1920 the syndicated cartoonist Nate Collier began a comic strip appearing in the Ottawa *Journal* with the line, “It was night. As black as Higgins Ink” (see Image 54). This tradition of citing Higgins Ink continued in later years: when the children’s book author and illustrator Dr. Seuss received an award, he accepted it by saying “Thank you, Mr. Higgins… and thank you, Mr. Smirnoff.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Marriage, family life, and Brooklyn society**

Around 1899 Higgins married Alexandrina (later Alexandra or Alexandria) Fransioli, the niece of the late Father Joseph Fransioli. There was about a fifteen or twenty-year age difference between them. According to the 1900 Federal census, Alexandrina was born in April 1875, although other censuses and passenger lists variously give ages and dates that place her birth at “about 1871,” “about 1872,” “about 1875,” or “about 1876.” She immigrated to the United States in 1885, and became a companion to her uncle Joseph Fransioli during the last five years of his life. At some point she also became a teacher in the primary grades at St. Peter’s Academy, the school attached to her uncle’s church, a position she held until 1893. In 1900 she was living at 254 Union Street in Brooklyn with her mother, the widowed Josephine Fransioli (born 1831), and her older sister Caroline, a stenographer. ***[Note: I have been unable to find a picture of Alexandrina Fransioli Higgins, apart from the one provided by Rachel Everson showing herself and her mother in a horse-drawn carriage.]***[[17]](#endnote-17)

When the girls’ brother Augustus Fransioli died near Saratoga, New York, in July 1899, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted that “Miss Carola [sic] Fransioli, is a clerk in the Brooklyn Post Office. Another sister is Alexandrina Fransioli, who is a concert and church singer and is at present engaged in a synagogue on Seventy-fourth Street and Fifth avenue, Manhattan, and St. John’s Chapel, this borough**.”** On January 31, 1900, a weekly New York-based magazine called *The* *Musical Courier* noted an upcoming recital by several students of a music teacher named Max Bendheim, including Miss Alexandra Fransioli, to be held in Bendheim’s studio at 332 West 56th Street in Manhattan. On March 21 the *Courier* noted another concert by a string trio at Wissner Hall in Brooklyn, at which Alexandra Fransioli was an accompanying contralto. Again, on May 16, the *Courier’*s column “Musical Gossip of Gotham” reviewed another recital by Bendheim’s students: “Miss Alexandra Fransioli… has grown so in voice volume and artistic stature as well that the writer did not know her. She has a big voice, and sang ‘Where Blooms the Rose,’ by Johns, and ‘O, Let Night Speak of Me,’ by Chadwick, with lovely expression.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

According to their grandson Charles Hamm, a member of the Fransioli family in New York had married into an Irish-American family of wholesale grocers named Quinn, and the Quinns had introduced Alexandrina to her future husband, Charles M. Higgins. There may also have been, however, a Swiss connection leading to the Higgins-Fransioli union. As noted above, in 1884 Charles’s sister Marguerite had married John Gianella (1838-1914), an Italian Swiss immigrant and a prominent man in New York City’s and Brooklyn’s Swiss émigré community. Like Father Fransioli, Gianella was a native of Dalpe in Ticino. In the 1910 Federal Census he stated that he had immigrated to the United States in 1865. With other Swiss Italians, including his brother Frank and the famous restaurateur Charles Delmonico, Gianella founded the Swiss Benevolent Society of New York. Thus it is possible that Marguerite Higgins’s marriage to John Gianella brought her brother Charles into a social circle of Brooklyn Swiss (and Dalpe natives) and thus into an acquaintance with Alexandrina Fransioli, while there may also have been a social connection with the Quinn family. Marguerite Higgins Gianella herself lived in Brooklyn until her death in 1942, raising three children, writing two books of poetry and contributing articles and essays to various newspapers and magazines (see Image 55).

According to Rachel Everson, her parents were married on July 4, 1899, although no records survive in available Brooklyn or Manhattan civil records or in readily accessible Roman Catholic Church records to confirm this. If this was their wedding date, Alexandrina clearly continued to bill herself as a single “Miss” for her singing engagements in 1900. Charles and Alexandria Higgins had three children: a boy, Tracy (1901-1981) and two girls, Rachel (or “Peggy,” 1902-1993), and Lisbeth (or “Liza,” 1904-1990). In 1894 and 1901, Charles Higgins had been living at 499 Fourth Street in Brooklyn, but by 1903 he, Alexandrina, and their growing family were living at 101 Prospect Park West (one of five adjacent Neo-Italian Renaissance rowhouses built in 1899), their primary residence until the end of his life in 1929 (See Images 56 and 57). The residential location, facing Prospect Park, was one of the most prestigious and elegant in Brooklyn.

In 1905 Higgins also bought 200 acres in Smithtown, Long Island, and named this property “Forest Farm.” It became a second home and summer retreat for the family (see Image 58). According to Higgins’s grandson Charles Hamm, Higgins would commute from Smithtown to the Brooklyn factory by steamboat via Long Island Sound and the East River: “He would pull up at Red Hook and take a carriage to Ninth Street.” Over the years Higgins would become an activist in Suffolk County affairs just as in Brooklyn’s, resorting to the courts and the press in crusades against various problems. These included the poor quality of local roads, the dangers to public health posed by an allegedly poorly-run horse farm near his estate, and, most critically, the risk of forest fires sparked by the locomotives of the Long Island Railroad as they passed through wooded expanses of the county. Lawsuits supported by Higgins against the railroad forced it to regulate its trains for fire safety in 1909.[[19]](#endnote-19)

As an upwardly mobile industrialist and active participant in civic affairs, Higgins and his family became confirmed members of Brooklyn’s social elite, frequently mentioned in the “Society” columns of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the magazine *Brooklyn Life*. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Brooklyn had its own “high society,” distinct from that of Manhattan. Part of this was due to the difficulty of breaking into the “Four Hundred” dominated by Fifth Avenue dynasties such as the Astors, or even into the newer “Wall Street” social circles of the Vanderbilts, Morgans, Carnegies, and Rockefellers. But elite culture in Kings County was also grounded in a self-conscious and proud identification with the “City of Churches” as distinct from Manhattan.

By the 1880s and 1890s, personal wealth and respectability often trumped what earlier would have been the drawbacks of immigrant Catholic origins when it came to being accepted into the ranks of Brooklyn’s largely Protestant elite, most of whom were descendants of colonial Dutch, Huguenot, and English families and of 18th and 19th-century migrants from New England. Like Manhattan, Brooklyn had a variety of competing, shifting, and sometimes mutually exclusive “high” social circles organized around religion (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish), national origin (Anglo-Saxon, Irish, German, and so on), politics (“machine” and “reformed” Democrats, Republicans, and others), and interests (riding, horse-racing, golf, boating, etc.). But there was also a pecking order in terms of the most prestigious, central, and hence desirable affiliations and invitations. A first-generation immigrant and industrialist might attain acceptance at the highest levels of Brooklyn’s elite more easily than in Manhattan, provided he and his family acculturated themselves to this elite's rituals and rules of conduct.

Higgins found that he could join elite business organizations, social clubs, and recreational societies; his Swiss-Italian wife could participate in Brooklyn-wide charities and dinners, and send her children to esteemed private schools and select parties. Higgins became a member of the exclusive Montauk Club (limited to 500 members at a time), as well as the Crescent Athletic, Brooklyn, and St. George’s Golf Club, and also the Huntington Bay Club on Long Island. He also involved himself in the affairs of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, the institution that oversaw the Brooklyn Museum (built 1895, opened 1897), the Brooklyn Academy of Music (1861), the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (1910), and the Brooklyn Children’s Museum (1899). In 1909, for instance, Higgins gave a gift of $1,000 which was used to buy the “A. S. Briggs collection of microscopical apparatus, books, and mounted objects.” (The trustees of the Institute at the time included Father Fransioli’s old friend and comrade Alfred Tredway White, suggesting the intergenerational mingling of Brooklyn’s civic, business, and social circles.) At the same time Higgins did not hide his heritage. In 1910 he participated in the 72nd Emerald Ball at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, an annual event of New York City’s prominent Irish-Americans held to benefit orphans; Higgins was one of 35 boxholders at the event (see Image 59).[[20]](#endnote-20)

An avid owner of pedigreed dogs and horses, Charles Higgins competed in Brooklyn’s yearly round of tournaments, which doubled as society events. In November 1892, for instance, Higgins showed greyhounds at a large dog show at the Palace Rink on Clermont Avenue, a setting for “the very aristocracy of the kennels of the country” according to the *Daily Eagle*; other exhibitors including the prominent Irish-American lawyer and political activist Bourke Cochran and Colonel Jacob Ruppert, Jr., the wealthy Manhattan brewer and eventual owner of the New York Yankees. In November 1896, at another show in Armory Hall on Flatbush Avenue, three of his dogs—Viva, Leo, and Vega—respectively won first, second, and third place in the category “Greyhounds: Puppies--dogs and bitches.” Three months later, at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club in Manhattan, Viva and Vega again won first and third prize.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Higgins also raised horses on his Smithtown estate. In 1911 his horse Spring Flower, “quite a looker” according to a *Daily Eagle* reporter, won a yellow ribbon at a Brooklyn horse show. In 1922, the “Brooklyn saddle horses” on display at the Huntington Bay Club Horse Show included Higgins’s Kitty May and Salena; Charles M. Higgins was one of those “applying for reservations for space so they can view the show from their motorcars.” Two years later, he was a member of the general committee of the Brooklyn Riding and Driving Club (located on Vanderbilt Avenue between Plaza Street and Butler Street, now Sterling Place), where his fellow committee members includedBrooklyn luminaries Charles A. Boody, Robert Gair, Erskine H. Lott, J. R. Van Brunt, and Adrian Van Siclen. All of his children would become seasoned riders and participants in the Brooklyn Riding and Driving Club (see Image 60).[[22]](#endnote-22)

Like other Brooklyn wives and mothers of her social position, Alexandrina Higgins (who, by 1915, was referred to as Alexandra in the state census, and as Alexandria in various sources by the 1920s) also engaged in a round of social and charitable activities. In 1923, for example, she was a member of the candy and program committee for an entertainment at the Brooklyn Academy of Music organized by the National League of Woman’s Service to raise money for World War I veterans in hospitals. During the 1920s and early 1930s she was also a recurring “patroness” for fund-raising lecture series and bridge matches (the latter repeatedly held at the Hotel St. George) organized by the Woman’s Auxiliary of the Brooklyn Children’s Museum.

Father Fransioli’s niece had also absorbed a sense of what was proper and dignified behavior for a successful Brooklyn family. As her daughter Rachel Everson remembered, “when I walked thru Prospect Park with my nurse and brother or sister I always smiled at the fine looking Irish policemen mounted on their sleek horses and they would bend down and give me a penny or two. This seemed a terrible offense to my mother and she forbade me ever to accept another penny from a ‘cop’ but I could smile and say hello.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

**Civic Engagement: Mass Transit**

A man of intense interests and energies, Charles Higgins plunged into causes that struck him as being necessary for the greater good, efficiency, and honesty of the city (and, after 1897, borough) of Brooklyn. As a successful businessman who loved the community that had become his home, he saw it as his duty to rectify wrongs and improve public conditions. As Brooklyn surged in population from 599,495 in 1880 to 838,547 in 1890, 1.2 million in 1900, and 1.6 million in 1910, the growing pains attendant on urbanization confronted its people with various problems involving municipal and borough governance, urban planning, and traffic and transit. Like other prominent businessmen, Higgins was an active member of several trade associations, civic clubs, and lobbying groups, most notably the South Brooklyn Board of Trade, the Brooklyn League, the Prospect Heights Citizens Association, the Manufacturers’ Association of New York, and the Merchants’ Association of New York.

In the early 1900s the South Brooklyn Board of Trade became Higgins’s base for a crusade to improve public transportation in Park Slope and adjoining areas, which he and others charged were not well served by the city government and the transit lines it franchised. In 1900, Higgins, along with his fellow members of the Bridges and Tunnels Committee of the Manufacturer’s Association of South Brooklyn (including paint maker Benjamin Moore; machine manufacturer E. W. Bliss; carton maker Robert Gair; industrialist Royal C. Peabody; engineer and inventor Marshall T. Davidson; and others) endorsed an idea to build an East River tunnel to meet the district’s business and commuting needs. As a reporter noted, “they think South Brooklyn needs such an outlet to Manhattan and they are determined… [on] having a terminus somewhere near Atlantic Avenue.” Despite the committee’s vowing to lobby the city’s Rapid Transit Commission, nothing came of the plan.[[24]](#endnote-24)

More lasting was Higgins’s commitment to improved streetcar service. In many 19th and early 20th-century American cities, the issue of public transit—especially in cases where city governments granted lucrative contracts or franchises to private, for-profit transportation companies—was a highly contentious one. In 1895 the popular idea that Brooklynites were “trolley dodgers” inspired a name for the baseball team soon managed and presided over by Charles Ebbets, one of Higgins’s colleagues on the South Brooklyn Board of Trade. But dodging fast-moving trolleys, and enduring the noise of loud bells and the screeching and thumping of wheels on tracks, was no laughing matter for many.

In July 1897, for example, one irate Brooklyn resident, W. Youngblood, wrote to the *Daily Eagle* to complain about the Nassau Electric streetcar company, which he claimed was racing its cars at the recklessly high speed of twelve to sixteen miles an hour on crowded Marcy Avenue. The streetcars were also a daily and nightly offense to the ears: “the ceaseless banging of gongs and the old flat wheel cars pounding, is enough to resurrect the dead and drive the residents to an insane asylum.” (As a transit spokesman explained to the *New York Tribune* in 1905, “the too sudden application of the brake may drag one wheel while the others are moving, flattening it.”) Youngblood blamed the Brooklyn Board of Aldermen for granting the franchise to the company in the first place, and he asked: “Are the authorities [so] afraid of this corporation that they allow them to violate the laws with impunity, or are they hand in glove with this octopus that has tried to gobble up all the streets, and so far accomplished it… to the great discomfort of our citizens, as well as causing the decrease of valuation of real estate on their lines?”[[25]](#endnote-25)

A few years later, and in another part of Brooklyn, Charles M. Higgins persisted in asking similar questions until he got answers he was satisfied with. For Higgins, who by 1904 was spearheading a Special Committee on Streetcar Nuisances for the South Brooklyn Board of Trade, the problem was the Ninth Avenue Line, owned and run by the Coney Island and Brooklyn Railroad Company. The line, Higgins charged, was rife with hazards and annoyances to the public. Conductors were using Prospect Park West (originally named Ninth Avenue) as a “common speedway,” racing their cars at uncontrollable and illegal speeds. Higgins publicly accused the company of “outrageous treatment of the public and the flagrant violation of our ordinances in… continuing to operate very defective cars at reckless speed on a very defective track.” Similarly unacceptable was “the operation of a thumping, thundering flat-wheeled car at midnight in our closely built streets.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The issue was a personal one for Higgins, since the line passed in front of his family residence at 101 Prospect Park West. As a man of science, Higgins knew how to collect data in order to build his case against the streetcar line, simply by standing or stationing someone to stand outside his home: “Repeated tests day after day and night after night with a stop watch over a measured distance between a series of trolley poles, show that the common speed of these cars is twenty-five miles an hour and often faster,” in flagrant violation of borough speed ordinances.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The question was how to get the streetcar line to eliminate its abuses. In 1903 Higgins supported a lawsuit brought by the New York City Board of Health that alleged that the speed and worn condition of Ninth Avenue streetcars was in violation of the law. Higgins was stunned when two of the three judges of the Court of Special Sessions overruled their colleague, concluded that the cars were not a “public nuisance,” and threw out the suit. Intimating in a letter to the *Daily Eagle* that the deep-pocketed Coney Island and Brooklyn Railroad may have helped to sway the two judges, Higgins stopped short of making an out-and-out accusation of bribery. As representative of the South Brooklyn Board of Trade’s Special Committee, in June 1904 he drafted an open letter to the New York State Board of Railroad Commissioners, calling their attention to the Board of Health’s efforts to rein in the streetcar line. Higgins noted that the Coney Island and Brooklyn Railroad was “the most profitable railroad in the city, having a larger net income and paying greater dividends than any other line in the city—or even in the state.” Accordingly, he called for a series of new state laws to “regulate the surface railroads of the entire state.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

Higgins stipulated nine points these laws would need to fulfill. The new laws would have to limit the profit-taking of shareholders and force the companies to retain set amounts of revenues for repairs and improvements; establish statewide speed limits based on population and building densities in different areas; make companies provide enough cars so as to avoid “long waits or overcrowding” for riders; require only seated passengers to pay a fare, while standing passengers could ride free; “penalize” companies that forced passengers to stand between seats or on outside footboards; fine companies for running flat wheels or other unduly noisy equipment, not replacing defective tracks, or running cars at high speeds; and make it the responsibility of companies to prevent passenger “rowdyism” on board the cars.[[29]](#endnote-29)

At first glance, this sweeping regulatory agenda might seem surprisingly radical for a wealthy industrialist and member of the conservative Manufacturers’ Association of New York. But among his other identities, Higgins was also a man of the turn-of-the-century “Progressive Era.” In this period, perceived threats to both public good and private enterprise brought together urban coalitions of middle-class commuters, neighborhood residents and business owners, and civic-minded community and industrial leaders to tame the “octopus” of transit monopolies. For an entrepreneur like Higgins who competed in the marketplace to provide the best possible products to attract customers, the monopolistic nature of the franchised lines, with their guaranteed revenues and their arrogant flouting of laws meant to maintain public safety and quiet, was outrageous. Like others who would have viewed themselves as followers of Adam Smith and the “invisible hand” of the marketplace, Higgins came to advocate a more stringent and expansive regulatory government in the face of “trusts” and privileged corporations immune from the penalties of the market, especially when backroom political deals and kickbacks favored such corporations. At least for the moment, the realities of urban life moved him into accepting a new relationship between economic freedom and the role of government, much as his contemporaries Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Louis Brandeis, Herbert Croly, fellow Brooklynites William Gaynor and Seth Low, and many others were doing. On the other hand, Higgins never seems to have called for the municipal ownership of transit lines, a position that also had many advocates during the era and ultimately prevailed in successive phases in New York City between 1925 and the 1960s as subway and bus lines became public rather than private entities.

In July 1904, Higgins led 27 other Prospect Park West property owners in sending a “printed letter of remonstrance” to New York City Mayor George B. McClellan (son of the Civil War general) blasting the “railroad nuisances and infractions… to all appearances countenanced by the authorities.” The signers, as the *Daily Eagle* put it, represented “interests amounting to over one million dollars on that fashionable and well built boundary of Prospect Park.” Having applied for redress to Brooklyn Borough President Littleton, Higgins, “the leading figure in the movement,” was directed by Littleton to the mayor. This time, Higgins and his fellow signers asked McClellan not to expand municipal powers but instead simply to enforce existing Brooklyn Borough ordinances setting the speed limit at 8 to 10 miles per hour; requiring each car to have a clearly visible speed indicator and an automatic speed check to prevent a speed over 10 miles per hour; and implementation of a Board of Health ordinance prohibiting flat wheeled cars as a “public nuisance.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

The following month Higgins, as agent of his Special Committee, hosted at 271 Ninth Street a meeting of “enraged property owners” bent on working through the Department of Highways and Public Works to force the Coney Island and Brooklyn Railroad to lay new tracks in order to eliminate the loud noises and vibrations emanating from the old existing tracks. Local residents, including businessmen, physicians, State Senator Walter C. Burton, and fellow members with Higgins of the South Brooklyn Board, the Brooklyn League, the Manufacturers Association, and the Prospect Heights Citizens Association were present. The assemblage complained of “falling ceilings, sleepless nights, reckless speeding, danger to the lives of little children, flat wheels, disconnected joints, uneven tracks and cobblestones.” They discussed the need to lobby and pressure the state legislature and the Transit Commission. Their resolutions included the demand that “worn and defective track,” flat-wheeled cars, inadequate numbers of workmen to maintain the track, and “overcrowding and overspeeding” be rectified. The gathering commended the Department of Health and Department of Highways and Public Works for aiding their efforts, but urged these civil servants to do even more, for example directing the Health Department to suppress speeding and crowding on the cars as inimical to public health, and the highways department to secure and reinforce new tracks. The resolutions concluded by condemning “the efforts of corrupt and sordid influences to control our departments for their own selfish ends as against the best public welfare,” thus tying the cause of good government to that of safe and responsible mass transit. “’Stand fast!’ is the battle cry, and they rallied mighty strong last night,” a reporter noted of the meeting.[[31]](#endnote-31)

By March 1905, *Brooklyn Life* magazine could editorialize, “Mr. Higgins has already accomplished much in bettering transit conditions on the Ninth Avenue lines by his personal efforts, and as he truly says the success there of his and his associates’ crusade has been felt on every other line in the city. Certain it is that the flat wheel nuisance is abated and less frequently are our nerves racked by the hideous noise of the improperly secured brake shoe… Our State commissioners occasionally make recommendations which for a time are partially followed by the companies, but, remove the pressure of public indignation and how soon a relapse into old ways follows…” Higgins, who had written and self-published two pamphlets, “City Transit Evils” and “The Legal Suppression of the Flat Wheel Car Nuisance,” now called for the creation of a New York City Department of Transit Control and Inspection “to ensure the permanent reform of our transit systems… for the protection of the public right and comfort.” Such a department could be created if “it is vigorously pushed by the different civic organizations backed up by individual effort.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

By April 1905, in fact, Higgins evidently had succeeded in having flat wheels and undue speeds eliminated, at least on the Ninth Avenue line, in large part because he had continued to marshall public opinion and support for the Board of Health in enforcing laws against public nuisances. To celebrate, on April 12 Higgins threw a banquet at the Montauk Club for “those boards of trade he selected as being most influential and active in the matter of securing transportation reform in this city.” In attendance were some forty presidents and secretaries of eleven Brooklyn and Manhattan organizations: his own South Brooklyn Board of Trade, the West End Board of Trade, the Brooklyn League, the Brooklyn Transportation Reform League, the Flatbush Taxpayers’ Association, the West End Taxpayers’ Association, the Prospect Heights Citizens’ Association, the Merchants’ Association of New York, the New York Board of Trade, the Smith Street and Central Board of Trade, and the Broadway Board of Trade. According to a reporter present, the evening’s speeches all focused on three points: “First, that the city officials have ample power to produce all the reforms which any reasonable public could desire, or ask, if they would only take it into their heads to make practical use of it. Second, these same city officials have far more power than the State Railroad Commission, to whom people have been looking for reform. The third idea was that the Mayor of Greater New York should organize a municipal railroad department for the government of these matters, and if he should refuse to do this, legislation should be put through Albany compelling him to act for the safeguarding of civic and municipal rights.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

Higgins continued to involve himself in municipal affairs, particularly when issues concerning the impact of transit on Brooklyn life were at stake. In 1909 he appears to have been part of the successful effort by the Prospect Heights Citizens’ Association and others to kill a plan to extend the elevated train line on Flatbush Avenue; as the Association’s second vice president, he also presided over a meeting at the Berkeley Institute on Lincoln Place to appoint a committee to interrogate the BRT on alternative plans to link the elevated line to the Manhattan Bridge. In 1912, at a special meeting of the New York City Board of Estimate, Higgins was among several “representative citizens” of Brooklyn who enthusiastically endorsed a plan for the improvement of the traffic approach to the Brooklyn side of the Brooklyn Bridge. In an address to the Board, Higgins argued that a new “proper plaza approach” being proposed by Bridge Commissioner Arthur J. O’Keefe *“*would relievethe incubus which has been depreciating real estate in the Brooklyn Heights section ever since the present bridge terminal was opened for traffic.” Higgins predicted that O’Keefe’s plaza would double the value of real estate in the North Heights.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The following year Higgins also fought an effort by his old nemesis, the Coney Island and Brooklyn Railroad, to build a new streetcar line on Fourth Avenue and Ashland Place, alleging that the new track was unnecessary and was actually part of a stratagem by shareholders to hike the value of C.I. & B. stock for their own selfish benefit. He further charged that interests connected to the Brooklyn Rapid Transit company secretly held the majority of C.I. & B. stock. Higgins, who himself now owned some C.I. & B. stock, thus entitling him to scrutinize the company’s books, charged that *“*rumor in Wall Street has it that the real owner of the stock is some one high up in one of the companies of the B.R.T… From my own personal knowledge the attempt of some big interest to obtain control of the C.I. and B. began last April. At that time many brokers in Wall Street were trying to buy up the company stock. Every stockholder received a letter from the Lawyers Title Insurance Company of 160 Broadway, Manhattan, urging us to sell our stock. The letter represented that the real buyer, who was acting through the Lawyers Title Insurance Company, already held two-thirds of the stock*.”[[35]](#endnote-35)*

Although Higgins did not hold public office, his expertise, energy, and civic engagement led to at least one offer of a major public post. In December 1909, as New York City Mayor-elect William J. Gaynor sought to put together his cabinet, the *Daily Eagle* noted that “according to reliable reports Charles M. Higgins is the man who refused the place of bridge commissioner, on account of ‘business and health.’ Mr. Higgins… has a summer home at Smithtown, L.I., about two miles from St. James, where Judge Gaynor has his country home. The two are intimately acquainted.”Of Irish Catholic descent, Gaynor was a Brooklyn Democrat who won election with Tammany Hall support, but at a historical moment when the Manhattan “machine,” under Boss Charles F. Murphy, had begun to understand the need to embrace some “progressive” reforms in order to win the votes of new Jewish and Italian immigrants, labor unionists, and middle-class liberals. Gaynor had been an outspoken New York State Supreme Court Justice, and reform of the city’s mass transit was on his mayoral agenda, although the municipal ownership of the subways that he advocated would only be effected in later years. Higgins was a logical choice for bridge commissioner, especially since the two men were friendly and were together officers of the Prospect Heights Citizens’ Association, but Higgins decided to decline the offer. He did play a role in Gaynor’s reelection campaign in 1913, when the incumbent sought to run as an independent reform Democrat against Tammany, but Gaynor—who had survived a shooting by a deranged would-be assassin in 1910—suddenly died before the election.[[36]](#endnote-36)

**Civic Engagement: The Brooklyn Bank**

One of Higgins’s most noteworthy contributions to Brooklyn’s public affairs would be set in motion by the financial Panic of 1907, in which a bank crisis on Wall Street was followed by a severe economic downturn nationwide, the collapse of numerous banks and other financial institutions, and the collaboration of the banker J. P. Morgan with Theodore Roosevelt’s White House in a largely successful effort to calm markets and restore stability. The lasting impact of the Panic would be to precipitate the founding of the Federal Reserve System in 1913-1914. In the short term, the plight of numerous banks threatened to ruin depositors and hurt shareholders. Such was the predicament of the Brooklyn Bank, located at 2 Fulton Street at the corner of Clinton Street, whose financial house was in disarray by November 1907.

The largest of the Brooklyn Bank’s depositors was Charles M. Higgins, who had used it both for business and personal accounts. Higgins immediately took charge of efforts to salvage funds and reorganize the bank’s affairs, chairing a meeting of the bank’s ten largest depositors in his office at 271 Ninth Street on November 7. At a meeting of some 200 depositors (those with deposits of at least $1,000) on November 23, Higgins’s attorney, Charles M. Stafford, announced the results of his initial investigation into the bank’s books. Stafford detailed what he described as a set of illegal transactions in which the Brooklyn Bank as well as the Borough Bank of Brooklyn had been merged into the International Trust Company (ITC) in October. Stafford intimated that one William Gow, who happened to be the majority shareholder in both the ITC and the Brooklyn Bank, and with his friends also held a controlling interest in the Borough Bank, had effected the merger in order to protect his own funds as the financial crisis unfolded. “Officials have betrayed their trust,” Stafford charged. “Illegal agreements have been executed, the funds and securities of the Brooklyn Bank and the International Trust Company juggled and paid out and manipulated in the interest of certain stockholders in control of the institutions, all without the knowledge, consent or approval of its depositors, having over two millions of dollars on deposit in the Brooklyn Bank.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

On December 10, 1907, a meeting of some 1,000 depositors in Historical Hall (the Long Island Historical Society, today’s BHS) at Clinton and Pierrepont Streets unanimously chose Higgins as their candidate for permanent receiver, to be recommended for that post to Judge James A. Betts of the New York State Supreme Court in Kingston, New York, who was overseeing the bank’s overhaul. Betts had already selected two other men, Bruyn Hasbrouck of New Paltz in Ulster County and New York State Attorney General William S. Jackson, as receivers, and Higgins would join them. The depositors expected that Higgins and the others would now wind up and liquidate the Brooklyn Bank’s affairs, starting afresh and thus allowing the bank, as the *Daily Eagle* put it, to “once more be one of the strongholds of financial Brooklyn.” At the meeting, Higgins “likened the Brooklyn Bank unto the ship that was boarded by pirates who changed the log and upset the calculations of latitude and longitude and put the steering gear out of commission. He pointed out that repentance and the desire to make restitution was now uppermost in the hearts and minds of those pirates and added that if full restitution is made by the International Trust Company directors who purloined the assets the depositors will get dollar for dollar.” Higgins added that “the institutions suspended are nearly all solvent… but if we get rapacious receivers who think more of their own fees than of the interests of the depositors, we will be mighty lucky if we get 50 cents on the dollar.” His warning proved prescient.[[38]](#endnote-38)

A month later, open war broke out between Higgins and the other receivers. Hasbrouck hired Charles A. Dolson of Buffalo as counsel for the receivers, under a contract that would reward Dolson with at least about $80,000, or 4 percent of the “money handled” coming in and going out of the receivership. Dolson had, in fact, been an aide to Attorney General Jackson (whose political base was the Erie County Democratic Party, headquartered in Buffalo), and had resigned his state post in order to accept the counsel position. The Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* strongly implied that Jackson, Hasbrouck, and Dolson, with Judge Betts’s blessing, were colluding to use the receivership for personal financial gain. Higgins immediately objected and proposed his lawyer, Stafford, for the counsel position. A “friend” of Higgins told a reporter, “Dolson must go… A foreign lawyer [i.e., from Buffalo], who has declared he doesn’t give a damn for the public of Brooklyn, cannot be allowed to remain as counsel to the receivers and take away thousands of dollars of the depositors’ money every month… Charles M. Higgins and Charles M. Stafford have gone into this fight with the backing not only of the Brooklyn Bank depositors, but with the public sentiment of Brooklyn behind them.” As Higgins himself said, “Every one knows, who has followed the history of receiverships in the last few years, that the matter of counsel fees is the source of the greatest waste and expense and so called loot in the administration of receiverships of which so many scandalous examples can be so readily given.’”[[39]](#endnote-39)

Tensions rapidly accelerated. At a hearing in Albany on January 21, Judge Betts confirmed Dolson’s appointment to the counselship over the strenuous objections of Higgins and his legal representative, David B. Hill, former New York governor and state senator (whose anti-temperance stance had frustrated Father Joseph Fransioli in 1888). “There was a sharp altercation between Jackson and Higgins at the noon recess,” the *Daily Eagle* reported, “when Jackson accused Higgins of ‘buying the newspapers of Brooklyn’ and threatened to have him removed.” In the afternoon, session, Jackson “interrupted Mr. Hill to ask if what he was saying about Mr. Dolson having been a former [assistant] attorney general was an argument for the appointment of Mr. Stafford as counsel for the receivers. Hill wheeled suddenly, and, pointing his finger at Jackson replied: ’No, sir. It is an argument against your man. It is an argument against the man who resigned his office under you to become counsel to this receiver.’ ‘Receiver Hasbrouck named him as his counsel, not I,’ Mr. Jackson responded, and Governor Hill at once answered: ‘If Receiver Hasbrouck had only kept away from your man Dolson, Hasbrouck would have been all right. But he did not, and therein lies all the trouble.’”[[40]](#endnote-40)

David Bandler, attorney for the Brooklyn Bank’s depositors’ committee (and Stafford’s law partner), advocated the appointment of Stafford in Dolson’s place, objecting that his clients did not know Dolson: “’They do know Mr. Higgins, and they have the greatest confidence in him and in his ability to serve them. He lives among them and they have reason to know that he will not think of serving himself at their expense. His position in the community would not admit of any other interpretation than that he will do his whole duty, if not more than his duty, by them. They do not like, nor do they have any confidence in Mr. Dolson’s resigning his place as deputy attorney general to take the counselship. They believe that he did all he could to have a receivership of this bank made permanent, and that he had in mind all the time that he was to be made the counsel to that receiver.’”[[41]](#endnote-41)

For his part, Attorney General Jackson “accused Mr. Higgins of coming to him in his office, while the temporary receiver was in charge of the Brooklyn Bank, and telling him that, if he agreed to what he (Higgins) and the depositors wanted, his administration would be rounded out without a slur upon it. But, if he did not, his administration would be damned… Jackson accused Mr. Higgins of being a meddler and the instigator and promoter of all the committees and mass meetings.” Following the hearing, Charles B. Stafford, who was also present, complained to a reporter that “in my experience of more than thirty-five years at the bar I have never witnessed anything of the sort… Mr. Jackson has conducted himself throughout like the lowest sort of a police court brawler.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

Higgins and his colleagues immediately filed to appeal the Dolson appointment. Meanwhile the harsh words continued to fly. On February 8 Higgins sent an open letter to Jackson, covered in the Brooklyn press, demanding that the attorney general retract his “False and Libelous” statements against Higgins. Nine days later, Higgins and his co-receiver Hasbrouck almost came to blows in the offices of the Brooklyn Bank. When Hasbrouck questioned the legality of a financial procedure ordered by Higgins, enabling a client to offset an account in the ITC against a loan from the Brooklyn Bank, the ink manufacturer lost his temper. Higgins jumped up from his chair and shook his finger at Hasbrouck, who was seated on the other side of a shared table. “You’re a disreputable man… You haven’t the courage of a sheep,” Higgins shouted. When Hasbrouck also jumped up, counselor Dolson interposed himself between the two men. “That big, ugly, blued-steel revolver in Receiver Bruyn Hasbrouck’s desk at the Brooklyn Bank is not intended for Receiver Charles M. Higgins,” a *Daily Eagle* reporter assured readers the following day. Hasbrouck laughed when the reporter asked him “when the duel was to be fought,” and he observed that the .38 caliber revolver had been left by a former employee: “It is not mine, and I’m not going to use it.”[[43]](#endnote-43)

Higgins and his allies scored a major victory on March 18, when the appellate division of the state court in Albany unanimously overturned Betts’s appointment of Dolson as counsel, ruling that Dolson’s affiliation with the state attorney general’s office was a conflict of interest, and that no “sinister or unworthy considerations” should taint that office’s relationship with insolvent corporations such as the Brooklyn Bank. The next challenge to Higgins’s equanimity was the court’s ruling that he and Hasbrouck together must pick a new counsel. After several meetings, more wrangling, and warnings from Judge Betts that he would remove both of them if they couldn’t work harmoniously, the two co-receivers compromised on former Brooklyn Borough president J. Edward Swanstrom, with former surrogate James C. Church as associate counsel.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Meanwhile, Higgins and his cohorts managed to untangle the bank’s affairs. In June 1908 a new board of directors was announced, including several respected Brooklyn businessmen (among them Higgins’s manager John E. Gavin) and Kings County registrar James W. Prendergast. A special advisory committee of three Brooklyn and Manhattan financiers was also established to help oversee the bank’s affairs. The Brooklyn Bank reopened with a capital and surplus of between $650,000 and $700,000 (instead of $300,000 “as under the old regime”); the cash on hand, “sufficient to meet all claims,” was $400,000 above all deposits. Higgins himself had been granted $19,000 for his work as receiver; $15,000 of that money he used to defray out-of-pocket expenses incurred by the work, while the remaining $4,000 he returned to the bank as in excess of his work. By December 1908, Judge Betts could proclaim that the bank’s “depositors had been paid in full,” and a bank representative asserted that it “was in a sound condition.”[[45]](#endnote-45)

The happy ending to the trials and tribulations of the Brooklyn Bank did not leave everyone satisfied. The *Eagle* intimated at one point that the mutual antagonism between Higgins and Hasbrouck, and perhaps Higgins’s stubbornness, was becoming a frustration for some depositors despite their respect for the ink manufacturer. Some raised eyebrows when Higgins’s lawyer Charles Stafford asked for and was awarded $12,000 out of the bank’s funds in payment for his legal work in opposing the Dolson appointment, despite the lack of a court ruling entitling him to the fee. This seemed ironic in the view of the *Daily Eagle* since Higgins maintained that Swanstrom and Church had been overpaid for their counsel work and should be forced to return a portion of their earnings. Higgins on one side and Swanstrom and Church on the other traded bitter recriminations in the Brooklyn press in late 1908. Higgins launched a successful lawsuit to have Swanstrom’s and Church’s fees reduced, which was upheld by the state Appellate Division in 1910 and the state Court of Appeals in 1911. Higgins, however, was outraged in 1912 when the Brooklyn Bank’s Liquidating Committee demanded that he reimburse $3,000 to the bank’s shareholders, money Higgins had spent in the successful suit to get Dolson removed.

In any event, Higgins had won the main points: rescuing depositors and removing the political and financial collusion that exploited bank assets for the personal benefit of “friends” of state attorney general William Jackson. As Higgins had proclaimed in March 1908, he was proud to be “able to prove to the intruders from Buffalo that Brooklyn is not a city of cravens, and that when they presumed… that they could intimidate and force the citizens of Brooklyn into a disgraceful situation of graft, injustice and oppression, they reckoned without their hosts, and that ultimately it will prove to be a case of being ‘hoist by their own petards.’” In thanks for his bank work, Higgins was “presented with a bronze statue” that was placed “in the outer lobby of the Higgins office building.” (This is probably the statue with the inscription“Ambula Ambula Semper Ad Lumen”—Latin for “On, On, Ever Towards the Light”-- illustrated by a photograph on a testimonial program issued by the sixteen-member Executive Committee of the Brooklyn Bank Depositors, now in the Brooklyn Historical Society collection of Charles M. Higgins papers (see Images 61 and 62).[[46]](#endnote-46)

**Civic Engagement: The Anti-Vaccination Movement**

Higgins’s knack for questioning constituted authority—political, financial, or otherwise—in the public interest led him to the most controversial crusade of his life, the campaign against compulsory vaccination. With a relatively small group of like-minded Americans, Higgins challenged the received medical wisdom that held that being vaccinated shielded people from contracting smallpox. In fact, Higgins believed, quite the opposite was true: by injecting foreign matter into the bloodstream, vaccination—or “disease grafting,” as he called it-- spread the risk of coming down with smallpox and other serious diseases. While the movement never succeeded in convincing the medical or political establishment of the merit of its argument, it managed to get state laws passed giving parents the right not to have their children mandatorily vaccinated in schools, apparently despite a U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* (1905) that strongly upheld the legality of mandatory vaccinations for smallpox. Today, the issue of compulsory vaccination for childhood diseases remains a contentious issue for some activists, parents’ groups, and religious denominations, and 48 of the 50 states grant parents the right to exempt their children from vaccinations on religious grounds. In the case of smallpox, the focus of most anti-vaccination argument in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Higgins was simply wrong: in 1979 the World Health Organization was able to declare the scourge of smallpox eradicated, thanks to global vaccination campaigns.[[47]](#endnote-47)

Controversies over inoculation went back to the 1720s, when Europeans and American colonists introduced from China and Africa a method of scratching the skin and rubbing it with infected matter from a smallpox victim in order to convey immunity. The innovation sparked a furious conflict in Boston, involving the Puritan minister Cotton Mather (pro-inoculation) and the printer James Franklin (anti-inoculation), older brother and employer of Benjamin Franklin. In the 19th century, the vaccination technique pioneered by English doctor Edward Jenner in 1798, entailing the injection of matter from livestock infected with a disease called cowpox into the bloodstreams of humans in order to prevent smallpox, became widely used in Europe and America and inspired mandatory vaccination laws as a public health measure.

But it also sparked a backlash among English and American critics who feared that vaccination actually spread disease, and who opposed compulsory vaccination for themselves and their children on the grounds of personal liberty from state coercion. As governments enforced compulsory vaccinations in the late 19th century in the face of smallpox outbreaks, an opposition movement emerged on both sides of the Atlantic, with the Anti-Vaccination Society (later renamed League) of America founded in New York in 1879, and the New York Anti-Vaccination League in 1885, both heavily influenced by British activists. During the 1910s, Higgins was treasurer of the national Anti-Vaccination League.

Higgins was in the thick of this crusade by 1903, when he turned a South Brooklyn Board of Trade meeting into a referendum on a bill being proposed in the New York Assembly opposing compulsory vaccination in the state’s schools. Higgins’s insistence that the board vote to endorse the bill provoked a “lively discussion,” including protests by two members questioning the relevance of such matters to the organization’s agenda for South Brooklyn. Higgins argued that “vaccination was utterly useless as a preventive, and dangerous,” and alleged that “more deaths occur from lockjaw, resulting from vaccination, than from smallpox itself.” He also charged that doctors falsified death certificates, attributing deaths to other causes when they knew the true cause was vaccinations. Despite opposition from some members, the board agreed by a vote of five to endorse the assembly bill. The bill, however, did not pass.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Higgins remained an ardent opponent of compulsory vaccination, writing and self-publishing at least eight pamphlets on the subject between 1907 and 1920 (see Images 63-73). In March 1909, he chaired a public meeting of the Anti-Vaccination League in Memorial Hall at Schermerhorn Street and Flatbush Avenue, attended by about fifty members and curious auditors. He decried the $20 million he claimed was invested in vaccine farms, and introduced John H. Bonner of the English National Anti-Vaccination League, who charged that vaccines spread smallpox and tuberculosis and explained how the movement had persuaded Parliament to pass anti-compulsory vaccination laws. Twelve days later, Higgins used the occasion of the Brooklyn League annual dinner at the Montauk Club to urge the League to oppose the use of vaccines taken from cattle possibly infected by foot and mouth disease. Rachel Everson later recalled her father “gathering us together to see the ‘Horrors of Vaccination.’ He showed slides taking the cow pox from diseased animals and injecting it in little children, then horrible pictures of children with ‘the foot and mouth disease.’”[[49]](#endnote-49)

In December 1911, Higgins obtained from Mayor Gaynor a letter prohibiting forcible vaccination in New York City. When, in January 1912, the city Health Department reported that its sanitary inspectors had vaccinated 13,000 people in Brooklyn over the past two weeks and planned to vaccinate 100,000 over the next three months, Higgins charged that the inspectors, accompanied by policemen, were coercing New Yorkers into having themselves and their children vaccinated. When an assistant sanitary superintendant responded that the police were present only to protect inspectors from fearful, angry, and ignorant parents, and that families were actually welcoming the vaccinations, Higgins dismissed this as an evasion: “what the police really did was to cut off all escape from the houses.”[[50]](#endnote-50)

In 1917, Higgins was still fighting, trying to get the New York State Legislature to disallow the state’s mandatory school vaccination policy, and demanding the right to inspect death certificates that he believed proved that local doctors were recording deaths caused by vaccinations as “tetanus” deaths. One of his last noteworthy public exchanges on the issue came in November 1921, at the monthly dinner of the Municipal Club of Brooklyn, when he debated Dr. William H. Park, director of the City Health Department’s Bureau of Laboratories and a vaccine proponent. Higgins reiterated his belief that the smallpox vaccine killed more people than the disease itself. The *Daily Eagle* summarized the debate as “inconclusive.” By then Higgins had also embraced what he viewed as a kindred cause for personal liberty against state coercion, opposition to the federal Prohibition law of 1920, against which he wrote and published one of his pamphlets, *Unalienable Rights and Prohibition Wrongs*, in November 1919.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Higgins’s singlemindedness on the vaccine issue exasperated some Brooklynites. In a letter to the *Daily Eagle* in June 1914, one John J. Barnicle, who described himself as a “neighbor” of Higgins’s, took the ink man to task:

Really it is too bad when a man, who in every respect is one of our best citizens, becomes so obsessed and such a monomaniac on a subject which is entirely foreign to him… that he projects his personal opinions in public print to such an extent that he is in danger of indictment as a common scold or nuisance… On matters relating to his own business I would take his opinion in preference to the united opinion of all the doctors in the world. Similarly as regards the cure or prevention of disease, I would rather follow the advice of a Long Island College Hospital junior than that of Mr. Higgins.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Barnicle asserted the majority view that the smallpox vaccine had played a successful and verified role in helping to eliminate the disfiguring and often fatal disease. Barnicle also got at the crux of the matter for many Brooklynites and other New Yorkers: the vulnerability to disease, and potential contagiousness, of the city’s vast immigrant working-class population. In the 1910s, the association of Jewish, Italian, and other European immigrants with cholera, tuberculosis, typhus, typhoid, diptheria, and smallpox was still strong in popular belief, and exposures of unsanitary conditions in working-class tenements and sweatshops reinforced the sense of risk. So had the case of the notoriously contagious Irish-born New York cook Mary Mallon, labeled “Typhoid Mary” in 1908.

“We have so many ignorant persons among our foreign population that these statements concerning the inefficiency of vaccinations may cause considerable trouble,” Barnicle continued. “The only thing I will say is from the result of personal observation covering nearly fifty years. I remember well as a boy going to school right here in Brooklyn that the facial evidences of the ravages of smallpox were so common among my fellows and among adults on the streets that no one took any notice of them. Nowadays and for years back they have been so uncommon that children seeing a victim on the streets tell their parents and ask what the awful thing is. Something has checked the ravages of the fell scourge and I believe it was the discovery of the immortal Jenner.”[[53]](#endnote-53)

The last word on the subject is perhaps best left to Rachel Everson, who recalled that she, her brother, and her sister “were never vaccinated. Although we attended private schools they did not force the vaccination requirement on us. Later in life I was vaccinated to travel and somehow felt disloyal to Father.”[[54]](#endnote-54)

**Civic Engagement: Religion and Race**

Charles M. Higgins was nothing if not an individualist in seeking his own answers to life’s questions. His single-minded pursuit of his own truth led him to some unorthodox positions, not only on medical questions but also on religious and racial issues. The son of Irish Catholic immigrants and the husband of Father Joseph Fransioli’s niece, Higgins renounced conventional Christianity, opting instead to define himself as a freethinker. According to Rachel Everson, Rachel Elizabeth Higgins “had ambitions for him becoming a priest but, at the age of twelve, he refused to be confirmed and considered himself a rationalist or agnostic. When he married Mother (born in Switzerland and a Roman Catholic)… he exacted a promise from her not to influence our religious training.” By 1894 he was an avid member of the Brooklyn Ethical Society, part of the Ethical Culture movement founded in New York City by Felix Adler in 1877 to embrace ethical behavior, social and educational reform, and “the belief that morality is independent of theology.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

Accordingly, during the late 1890s Higgins sent letters to the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* defending the controversial orator and writer Robert G. Ingersoll, “the Great Agnostic.” In December 1898, for example, the *Eagle* printed his denial of assertions that Ingersoll was an atheist. “I must admire his clear, outspoken character,” the ink manufacturer continued, “whereby all men can know just where he stands and what his point of view is—that of a clear cut rationalist.” Higgins used the article to outline his own rejection of the Judeo-Christian belief in a “personal god”—anthropomorphic and in a direct relationship with human beings—for what he saw as the more rational view taken by the ancient pagan Greek philosophers, Hindu “Vedantists,” and Buddhists that an impersonal force governed the universe. Higgins concluded by denouncing the “monumental egotism… found among the believers in personal gods and special providences, among those who seriously consider themselves special favorites of Heaven and in a particular sense in the mind’s eye of that Infinite and Eternal Energy which undoubtedly runs this ‘stupendous scheme of things’ of which that brilliant but conceited animal, man, forms really so small a part.”[[56]](#endnote-56)

Yet in his own family circle Higgins cited Old and New Testament passages that he found worthy, including the exhortation in Micah 6:8 to “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy god,” and the “Golden Rule” as stated in Matthew 7:12: “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.” As Rachel Everson recalled in 1977, “I can remember so clearly those ‘Sunday talks’ we three children were gathered together to hear every Sunday, sometimes on excerpts from the Greek philosophers, sometimes from the Bible and the Declaration of Independence.”[[57]](#endnote-57)

Higgins’s religious and philosophical beliefs also revealed his remarkably egalitarian views on race. He cited Vedantic Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Jainism, and Taoism as among the “impersonal religions” he found attractive. In 1894, Higgins invited the Indian Hindu Swami Vivekananda, then touring the United States, to address the Brooklyn Ethical Society; the Swami accepted the invitation and delivered a lecture to the society’s members. Higgins, who had attended the celebrated World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, may have first encountered the swami there, since Vivekananda participated in the Exposition’s “Parliament of the World’s Religions” and spoke in English to an audience of 7,000. In 1896-1897, the Brooklyn Ethical Society also hosted a lecture series on different ethical systems by another visiting Hindu Swami, an Indian Parsi, a Ceylonese Buddhist, a rabbi, and speakers on the ancient Greeks, China, Islam, the New Testament, German Idealism, Utilitarianism, and Darwinism. Higgins personally paid to have John C. Kimball’s Darwinist lecture, “Ethics of Evolution,” printed as a pamphlet (see Images 74 and 75).

What makes Higgins’s tolerance so striking is that late 19th and early 20th-century American thinking was full of racial stereotyping, discrimination, and “scientific” rhetoric that invidiously ranked the various races of mankind. Northern European Protestants invariably were at the top of these hierarchical schemas, followed down the rungs of the human ladder by the Irish, Southern and Eastern Europeans, Jews, Asians, Latin Americans, and Africans. Brooklyn was not immune to these prejudices, despite its abolitionist and social reform traditions. African Americans, Chinese, Japanese, and others were routinely patronized in New York City’s and Brooklyn’s popular culture and press. For example, another, unrelated Charles Higgins in Brooklyn—Charles S. Higgins, a soap manufacturer—repeatedly used stereotypical images of black “mammies” in his advertising, and other businessmen and artists caricatured Asians (see Images 76-78).

Following the Spanish-American War of 1898 in which the United States gained control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, many Americans cited the alleged inferiority of “heathen” Asian institutions and peoples to justify further American economic and political expansion in the Far East. In 1900, such arguments underpinned American military intervention in China to help six European powers and Japan in putting down the Boxer Rebellion, a nationalist uprising against foreign business interests and Christian missionaries. On May 29, 1900, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* confidently editorialized that “China will become Christian in all the essentials after it is covered with railroads and telegraph lines.” Once “industrial and commercial expansion” under Western auspices gave the Chinese “a glimpse of the impelling spirit in occidental civilization and occidental law and justice,” the “oriental mind” would come to accept superior ways. On June 5, the paper further commented on the unfolding Chinese crisis: “The Caucasian race does not intend that there shall be any part of the world in which it may not do business… the yellow or black race which stands in the way will be treated with scant courtesy. If China must be dismembered before the Caucasians may safely live there the dismemberment will not be long delayed.”[[58]](#endnote-58)

Higgins would have none of it. In a letter to the *Daily Eagle* that he later expanded into a pamphlet, Higgins took the paper to task for its views. He lamented “the monstrous religious conceit of the ordinary Christian” and “the wonderful unconscious egotism and truculence of the Anglo-Saxon” in regard to China, “one of the greatest contributors to the elements of historic civilization.” Was it not true, Higgins asked the paper’s readers, “that the so-called Christian nations are the most military, conquering and obtrusive on the face of the earth… ready to war with another at a moment’s notice… continually engaged in attempts to conquer, divide and annex weaker peoples in the non-Christian world?” England, France, Germany, and Russia were seeking to control territory in China in order to “get the profits that come from the export of her peculiar and valuable products and the advantage that comes from the sale or output of their own manufactured goods.”[[59]](#endnote-59)

Higgins reserved his most pointed disdain for American condescension, noting that “we have laws now in our own land which strictly exclude all Chinese laborers or artisans,” and for American hypocrisy in the face of the Boxer violence: “I might remind our Christian friends that we have had a few bad and murderous riots in our own times to exclude foreigners, negroes, Italians, Chinese, etc., and some terrible Southern lynchings and Northern labor riots… and yet we don’t consider our civilization a failure or a barbarism on that account.” Rather than worrying about civilizing China, whose sage Confucius espoused the “Golden Rule” 500 years before Christ, Christians should first “try to reduce the drunkenness, the prostitution, the vagrancy, and the crimes of violence and murder so prevalent in all Christian countries, as well as the shameful political corruption and dishonesty that are so common with us before they attempt to waste their efforts on far distant people who really seem to need them less than their own.” Higgins concluded by urging Christian nations to civilize themselves by embracing “the ethical essentials of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism,” thereby “making them give some real and thorough regard to the principles of true reciprocity and justice in international and interracial affairs.”[[60]](#endnote-60)

**Civic Engagement: Commemorating the Battle of Brooklyn**

If Charles M. Higgins left his mark on Brooklyn’s mass transit system and the financial security of thousands of the borough’s bank depositors, his enduring legacy can also be detected in Kings County’s landscape of preserved and protected historical sites. The immigrant became an impassioned American patriot and amateur historian, fascinated by what he viewed as Brooklyn’s neglected role in the Revolutionary War (1775-1783). At a time when textbooks and popular culture privileged Boston as the “cradle of the revolution” and Philadelphia as the city where independence was declared in 1776 and secured by the U.S. Constitution in 1787, Higgins saw that the Battle of Brooklyn (also known as the Battle of Long Island) had been a crucial moment in the revolutionary struggle. Yet the landscape of that battle had been transformed, with parts of it absorbed into Greenwood Cemetery and Prospect Park, and other areas in the Park Slope and Gowanus neighborhoods built up as population and development increased in the 19th century.

Similarly, popular memory and understanding of the battle had been erased among most Americans, and even among most Brooklynites. The fact that the battle had been an American defeat rather than a victory did not help matters. In a letter to the *Daily Eagle* in 1915, Dr. William H. Hale, Brooklyn Superintendent of Public Baths, recalled that as a young boy he had lived with his elderly relative Gideon Denning, a veteran of the Battle of Brooklyn. But Hale was in his mid-seventies, and such living links to Brooklyn’s revolutionary past were dwindling.

Admittedly a harrowing defeat for George Washington’s fledgling Continental Army, the Battle of Brooklyn could have ended the war and the ability of the United States to separate from Great Britain. But at a pivotal moment on August 27, 1776, 400 men of the First Maryland Regiment under General William Alexander (also known as Lord Stirling) endured a terrible infantry and artillery onslaught by Lord Cornwallis’s redcoats at an old stone farmhouse—the so-called Old Stone House, or Vechte Cortelyou House-- along Gowanus Creek. The regiment lost 256 men, but in holding off Cornwallis, the Marylanders allowed Washington to withdraw the rest of his army from the field and to the temporary safety of fortifications on Brooklyn Heights. Washington then was able to slip his main force across the East River to Manhattan on the night of August 29. Four months later, Washington gave the revolution a new lease on life through his victories at Trenton and Princeton—but only because his army had survived and escaped Brooklyn. To Higgins, the bravery and sacrifice at Gowanus was one of the most inspiring moments in American history and a key to the survival and victory of the nation that had become his home.

By 1910, Higgins was launching a multi-pronged campaign to raise public awareness of the battle’s significance and to have its sites enshrined as public landmarks with historical markers and monuments. In an address at the Montauk Club in 1910, he underscored how the first battle after the passage of the Declaration of Independence—and therefore, the first battle fought by the United States—had been in “South Brooklyn.” Throughout the era, in pamphlets, letters to editors, a patriotic poetry-writing contest he sponsored, a painted portrait of Lord Stirling he commissioned (see Images 79 and 80), lectures before civic groups and school classes, and walking tours for city officials and fellow enthusiasts, Higgins repeated the need to memorialize several locations that he reconnoitered in person from his Ninth Street office and Prospect Park West home.

In 1911, he co-founded the Kings County Historical Society (not to be confused with the Long Island Historical Society, founded in 1863 and predecessor to the Brooklyn Historical Society) with the avowed purpose of preserving “the historical landmarks of the county, especially of the Flatbush section,” including “several of the old Flatbush houses, which are now fast disappearing.” As a reporter described the first annual dinner of the Society in 1912, held at “Kings County Historical Hall” (the former Church of the Nativity) between Amersfoort Place and Kenilworth Place in Flatbush, “Charles M. Higgins… was introduced as the ‘Sage of Old Gowanus,’ and… said he had been nicknamed ‘Old Stone house’ Higgins.”[[61]](#endnote-61)

On the 140th anniversary of the battle in 1916, Higgins laid out a sweeping plan for marking and memorializing the South Brooklyn landscape. For the anniversary, Higgins and others had drafted texts for temporary historical markers that New York City Parks Commissioner Ingersoll had placed at several sites. But Higgins argued for something permanent, and in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* outlined his vision for locations of particular significance (See Image 81).

Higgins proposed erecting two inscribed lampposts and an “illuminated arch” over East Drive in Prospect Park to mark the American line of defense on the morning of August 27, 1776; placing “old revolutionary cannon” on Redoubt Hill at Battle Pass, where American General John Sullivan’s troops were attacked from the rear by redcoats as they faced a frontal assault from Hessians; bronze tablets or tablet lampposts at various other points on the battlefield within the current borders of Prospect Park; a memorial bronze gate in the Prospect Park wall opposite First Street (known as the Porte Road in 1776) to indicate the chief line of American retreat; and “a grand memorial reviewing stand”on a nearby meadow in the park to provide “a public forum with most inspiring surroundings for open air public assemblages from time to time.”[[62]](#endnote-62)

Higgins believed that New York City’s government should play a role in preserving the national heritage. In a 1912 address, with an eye on potential allocations for historic preservation and commemoration, he “advocated that the recent plans for ‘Brooklyn Beautiful’ be carried out at the expense of the taxpayers, and stated that an expenditure of $10,000,000 a year for improvements would increase the tax rate only 60 cents for every $1,000 of property values.”[[63]](#endnote-63)

Higgins’s grandest recommendation was to adorn Battle Hill in Greenwood Cemetery, site of the battle’s first major engagement (and, at 220 feet, the highest natural point in Brooklyn) with “a grand towering monument like that of Bunker Hill, placed on this most elevated and scenic and entrancing viewpoint in Brooklyn, which overlooks the entire city and adjoining lands and waters.” As for the “old Stone House” at Gowanus “and the sacred ground around it,” where Lord Stirling’s Marylanders had held off Cornwallis and enabled Sullivan’s troops to escape, Higgins also had a proposal: “The city, State or nation should purchase the two big vacant blocks included between Fourth and Fifth avenues and Third and Fifth streets, and this ground should be laid out as a memorial park or playground, and the old Stone House, which is now buried ten feet underground near the corner of Third street and Fifth avenue, should be restored and used as a museum of historic relics. A suitable arch or monument should also be erected in due time on some part of this sacred ground.”[[64]](#endnote-64)

Indeed, by 1911 Higgins had already founded and chaired what he called the Battlefields Committee of Brooklyn, with support from the Long Island Daughters of the Revolution and others, “to interest the city to purchase, for a memorial, the site of the Battle of Long Island, Fifth avenue, between Third and Fifth streets.” The previous year, in his pamphlet *Brooklyn’s Neglected Battle Ground,* Higgins had chronicled in words and photographs the empty lot where the Stone House had once stood (see Images 82-86). If public funds were not allocated, Higgins suggested that wealthy men or patriotic societies raise the money, or that a general subscription be started for the purpose. In doing so, funders would “in due time absolve Brooklyn from the extraordinary historic and patriotic neglect which it has heretofore shown in this whole matter.”[[65]](#endnote-65)

Much of Higgins’s ambitious program was never realized. However, he won at least some victories in his fight for recognition of the Battle of Brooklyn. On August 27, 1920, the battle’s 144th anniversary, Higgins joined New York Governor Al Smith and other dignitaries in the dedication of the Altar to Liberty on Battle Hill, a more modest memorial than the “grand towering monument” he had advocated four years earlier. Still, the day was celebrated on Battle Hill with great fanfare; a warship stationed off the Statue of Liberty saluted the gathering, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Democratic candidate for Vice President who had stepped down as Assistant Secretary of the Navy literally the day before, addressed the crowd at the Altar to Liberty. Higgins had played the leading role in planning, commissioning, paying for, and placing the memorial, which comprised “a statue of the Greek Goddess Minerva, Goddess of Wisdom and War, one hand laying a wreath of laurel on the altar to honor the men who fought and died in the Battle of Long Island, and the great principles for which they died, and the other raised in salute to the Statue of Liberty in the harbor below.” Like other New Yorkers and Brooklynites, Higgins had contributed to the fund that had paid for the Statue of Liberty’s pedestal back in the 1880s (see Images 87-93).[[66]](#endnote-66)

In fact, the Altar to Liberty was installed in front of the private cemetery plot Higgins had bought for himself in 1917 and the family mausoleum he had constructed there, at the summit of Battle Hill. In lieu of an outpouring of funds from either government or public, Higgins had also paid for several historical markers and plaques to be installed in key locations. In Rachel Everson’s recollection, “I can remember all the sketches we had around one room in the house showing the sculptor’s (Ruckstall) idea of Minerva, Goddess of Wisdom and War, and the plans for the family tomb. It did seem a little strange to me that Father had such an inordinate interest in his final resting place and memorializing what he termed the first battle for liberty but I was also fascinated somehow. He even studied the site of different formations of troops thru Prospect Park eventually to fight on Battle Hill in Greenwood and placed, at his own expense again, huge boulders with bronze plates as historical markers.”[[67]](#endnote-67)

Everson also reflected on how frustrating the effort to raise awareness and funding had been for her father: “I remember how hard he worked going to various meetings and often so disappointed he couldn’t stir up enthusiasm and raise money.” But Higgins’s impact on Brooklyn’s historical consciousness did not go unappreciated, at least by some in the borough. In 1920, in an article in the *Daily Eagle,* newspaperman Edward V. Riis, son of the great social reformer, journalist, and photographer Jacob Riis, asserted that “year in and year out, as hard as he knew how, one man has labored unceasingly to arouse the people to the importance of marking the sacred ground where the chief engagement of the Battle of Long Island was fought… This man is Charles M. Higgins… [W]ithout his untiring zeal the fact that the Republic was saved on Brooklyn soil would have passed into the limbo of things forgotten.”[[68]](#endnote-68)

In retrospect, one aspect of Higgins’s activism seems striking: his focus on the need for historic preservation and commemoration as, first and foremost, a *Brooklyn* rather than a New York City duty. In the wake of the 1898 consolidation of Greater New York and Brooklyn’s loss of its independent municipal identity, Higgins’s campaign—consciously or not-- arguably served as one means by which Brooklynites could maintain and, in fact, build their own heritage, self-awareness, and local pride in the shadow of Manhattan.

Ultimately, Higgins’s crusade was ahead of its time, but it contributed to a gradually increasing movement among Brooklynites and other New Yorkers to safeguard their historical sites and heritage. A few years after his death, the Old Stone House at Gowanus was restored and partially rebuilt by the city as a centerpiece of J.J. Byrne Park, where it continues to serve educational purposes today. Plaques put up in Prospect Park by Higgins and other members of the Kings County Historical Society still mark important locations in the Battle of Brooklyn. Perhaps most significantly, professional historians have come to agree with Charles Higgins that the battle was a pivotal one in American history, an event worthy of commemoration and study.

That Higgins’s historical sense and patriotism were deeply personal as well as publicly expressed is captured in Rachel Everson’s memory of the private ritual he invented for his children, seemingly a merging of his patriotism with his interests in both Greco-Roman pagan religion and the American Revolution: “Always on the Fourth of July and on other holidays or occasions we children would pick flowers and pull them down in a little wagon to a certain spot, ‘Breezy Borders’ [presumably on the Smithtown estate] where Father had had a little altar built. There we would offer the flowers as a burnt offering or sacrifice in thanks for life, liberty and pursuit of happiness in America. Sometimes this was so different from what other children did it embarrassed us.”[[69]](#endnote-69)

**The Higgins Family: Transitions**

Charles M. Higgins died on October 21, 1929, at age 75 in his home at 101 Prospect Park West, eight days before the stock market crash of Black Tuesday, October 29 foreshadowed the Great Depression. His health had been bad for several years, and his death came after a prolonged illness. In his will he had stated that “I desire a simple and dignified funeral without any dogmatic religious services and without any offense to any religion, and I prefer that this be held in the beautiful Chapel in Greenwood Cemetery.”Some 300 people attended the funeral. Dr. Henry Neumann of the Brooklyn Ethical Society performed the eulogy in the chapel. His silver casket was interred in the family vault he had had erected on Battle Hill.[[70]](#endnote-70)

In September 1930 Higgins’s estate was appraised at a gross amount of $775,405.00 and a net amount of $699,720.00; most of the property consisted of the Smithtown property, and securities and partnerships, most importantly the nine-tenths of Higgins Ink shares that Charles Higgins had retained in his possession. Out of the estate, Tracy Higgins received $375,000.00, Rachel Everson and Lisbeth Higgins received $48,877.000, and Alexandra Fransioli Higgins received $142,822.00. In his will, drafted in the mid-1920s, Higgins had intended that funds be bequeathed to employees and to several charities, but in the intervening years expenses had reduced the funds in the estate that had been assumed to pay for these bequests. To make up the difference, Mrs. Higgins renounced $30,000 of her husband’s legacy, while Tracy, Rachel, and Lisbeth each renounced $5,000. The resulting $45,000 went to pay a one-time gift of 5 percent to 10 percent of a year’s salary to all 56 employees of Higgins Ink; amounts as high as $1,000.00 to personal employees and servants; and $100.00 each to every man who had worked on the Smithtown estate for a year or more.

Alexandra Higgins would live until October 1955. In the 1930 Federal Census, “Alexandria Higgins” was listed as a homemaker at 101 Prospect Park West, with her home valued at $25,000. Her daughter Lisbeth also lived at the address, along with two servants, New York-born May Coyle and Swedish-born Ruth Carlson. In the spring of 1930, mother and daughter moved to a “maisonette apartment” at 35 Prospect Park West (a high-rise co-op building designed by the eminent architect Emory Roth in 1929) which also possessed a private entrance at 325 Garfield Place; Tracy Higgins would join them there (see Image 94). Family members continued to enjoy the country estate at Smithtown, Long Island. A seasoned traveler since her early days with her uncle Joseph Fransioli, Mrs. Higgins also ventured abroad. In early 1930 she and Lisbeth returned on the ocean liner *Mauretania* following a Mediterranean cruise; they took a summer cruise to Scandinavia on the *Kungsholm* in 1933; Mrs. Higgins went solo on a Caribbean cruise on the *Empress of Australia* in 1936; and in 1939 she sailed from Bermuda to New York on the *Monarch of Bermuda*.[[71]](#endnote-71)

Charles and Alexandra Higgins’s three children grew up in Brooklyn, with summers and other vacations at the Smithtown estate. As children they often participated together in Brooklyn social and recreational activities. In 1912, for example, eleven-year-old Tracy and seven-year-old Lisbeth were among some 150 children attending a “juvenile masquerade” at the Chateau du Parc. In 1915, both Tracy and Rachel won awards at the Young People’s Horse Show of the Riding and Driving Club, an event in which their mother, as “patroness,” handed out cups to winners and their father was counted “among the prominent spectators.” All three children continued to participate in public equestrian events in Brooklyn and on Long Island during their teenage years. Their social lives would also partly revolve around select Brooklyn institutions, including the Brooklyn Heights Casino (founded in 1904) and the Brooklyn Riding and Driving Club (1889).[[72]](#endnote-72)

**Tracy Higgins**

The oldest child, Tracy Higgins, attended Brooklyn Friends School and then Dartmouth College. By 1925 he was working for his father at the ink company, and by the following year was the firm’s general manager; he would later become its president (see Images 95 and 96). In 1925 he married Madelyn Waterman, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Waterman of Brooklyn and Westhampton Beach, and they had three sons. In June 1939 the couple separated and later divorced. (Meanwhile, in August 1939, shortly after the separation, Madelyn Waterman Higgins’s home in Smithtown—possibly at Forest Farm itself—was the scene of a sensational crime when Madelyn’s friend and house guest Mrs. Elizabeth Greeve Caldwell Carolin was shot and wounded by Lawrence Sprague, a rejected lover. Sprague also shot and injured a state trooper in the house before shooting and killing himself. Mrs. Carolin’s father was the former president of the Prudence Bond Company of Brooklyn.)

Tracy Higgins married Leigh McLeer in 1942. He inherited Forest Farm at Smithtown from his father. But he also lived at a number of Brooklyn addresses during his working years at Higgins Ink. In 1925 he was still living with his parents at 101 Prospect Park West, but the following year the newlyweds were at 441 Ocean Avenue. In 1927 they were living at the Berkeley Plaza, a luxury apartment complex intended, according to the *Eagle*, to keep Brooklyn’s elite from moving to Manhattan, and in 1928 the couple were living at 114 Stratford Road. In 1929 Tracy Higgins bought the house at 113 Garfield Place from James A. Farrell, president of the U.S. Steel Corporation, for a reported $50,000; the house was described as “one of the finest homes in the Park Slope neighborhood.” But by 1930 the Tracy Higgins family was living at 35 Prospect Park West, the same address as his mother and sister Lisbeth. Tracy was still living here in 1942. In his later years, he spent much of his time at the Smithtown estate. In 1951 he sold a part of the property, which was subdivided into 68 residential parcels which were developed and sold as Woodland Estates. Tracy Higgins died at Smithtown in 1981.[[73]](#endnote-73)

With Tracy Higgins as president and manager, the Higgins firm incorporated in 1930 following Charles Higgins’s death: Tracy was chairman of the board, with other board seats assumed by John Gianella, Jr. (the factory’s vice president for quality control), Mrs. Higgins, Rachel, and Lisbeth. In an incident in 1930, two company employees, Joseph Connolly and Edward Kiernan, were robbed at gunpoint as they returned to the office from the Prospect National Bank at Fifth Avenue and Ninth Street with the firm’s $1,800.00 payroll. By coincidence, as they entered Tracy Higgins’s office to inform him of the loss, Tracy’s brother-in-law Alfred H. Everson was in the act of trying to convince him to take out a payroll insurance policy. Despite the robbery, Tracy Higgins declined to do so.

The company promoted the brand during the 1930s by sponsoring a nationwide Higgins Ink drawing contest; in 1935, 3,000 high schools competed. In 1941, when the *Daily Eagle* described it as “the oldest and best known” of the 17 Brooklyn firms manufacturing inks for writing, printing, and lithographing, Charles M. Higgins & Co. officially became Higgins Ink Co., Inc., ostensibly to make the brand name easier to remember. That year the factory’s manufacturing space consisted of over 30,000 square feet, exclusive of the firm’s offices. During normal production there were about 50 employees, with seven retirees on pensions. National distribution of Higgins products was arranged through a system of 7,000 “jobber houses” which sold to retailers. Higgins Ink provided group life insurance policies, a lunch room and kitchen, recreational facilities, and free beverages for its employees.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Also in 1941, as the Roosevelt administration began pumping billions of dollars into the American economy for defense industry “preparedness” in case of war, Higgins Ink did its patriotic part. A reporter noted that until the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the company’s products had been shipped around the world: “On every package shipped to foreign sources appeared the name of Brooklyn... Among the markets still open… are Africa and South and Central America.” In September 1941 the firm offered free to any “draftsmen engaged in armament industries and to teachers in America’s crowded industrial and vocational schools” a 30-page booklet “giving the authentic standards of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and the American Welding Society.” The company was “swamped” with requests for the booklet from companies, schools, and individuals (see Image 97). By November, Tracy was a member of the Priorities Committee of the New York-area Priorities Field Service, a group of industrialists tasked with coordinating efforts with the federal Office of Production Management to ensure that production materiels were properly allocated to firms holding or seeking contracts for defense work with the government.[[75]](#endnote-75)

In the postwar era, the firm remained at its Brooklyn site. It regularly advertised for new workers. In March 1947, for example, it needed “girls” for packing boxes for forty hours a week at sixty cents an hour. In 1952, girls were needed for packing at $30.40 weekly to start, while male packers received $42.40. In 1953, a receptionist was needed at $45 weekly to start, and a stenographer-typist at $55 to start. In 1964, when Higgins Ink was producing four million bottles of ink a year, the company was sold to A.W. Faber-Castell Pencil Company of Newark, New Jersey, while retaining its identity as a wholly owned subsidiary. By 1969 operations had been shifted from the Brooklyn site to the Faber-Castell plant in Newark, where “Higgins Ink” was manufactured until 1989. Subsequently Sanford Ink bought the brand, and in 2008, Chartpak Inc., based in Leeds, Massachusetts, acquired Higgins Ink. Chartpak continues to manufacture it today.[[76]](#endnote-76)

**Rachel Higgins Everson**

Tracy’s sister Rachel (“Peggy”) graduated from Packer Collegiate Institute and Vassar College, married engineer and World War I veteran Alfred Hall Everson, and had five children, raising them in their home at 158 Hawthorne Street in the Prospect Lefferts Gardens section of Flatbush. Support for social work and social service became a lifelong passion for her. By the 1920s she (along with her younger sister Lisbeth) was active in the affairs of the Junior Guild of Colony House, a settlement at 297 Dean Street serving the Boerum Hill community, founded in 1916 by members of the Brooklyn Chapter of New England Women. She would go on to become the president of Colony House by 1936 and remain a member of its board at least into the mid-1950s. During the 1940s and 1950s, other activities included serving as vice president and president of the Brooklyn Council for Social Planning (BCSP); chairwoman of the board of trustees of the Association of Brooklyn Settlements (ABS, described in 1952 as a group of eight nonsectarian Brooklyn settlement houses serving 15,000 youths “directed daily toward better citizenship through wholesome recreation and better leadership”); vice president of Youth United (founded to help raise funds for ABS); chairwoman of the advisory committee of the Gowanus Community Center, founded in 1950 at 415 Baltic Street; and board member, finance committee chair, family service committee chair, Flatbush district committeewoman, and president of the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities (BBC, later the Brooklyn Bureau of Social Service and today Brooklyn Community Services)(see Images 98-100).[[77]](#endnote-77)

Thus her engagement in social service echoed the legacy of her great-uncle Father Joseph Fransioli, who had cofounded the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities in 1878. She also confronted the changing realities of poverty in Brooklyn, notably an influx of African American and Puerto Rican families who joined and increasingly replaced white families in poor neighborhoods; the rise of public housing projects as an ostensible solution to the problems of tenement house living; and the onset of newly highlighted social problems such as juvenile delinquency and youth gang violence. Thus the Gowanus Community Center, based in the Gowanus Houses housing complex, had as one goal in 1950 the improvement of conditions for young people in adjacent “upper Park Slope where gangs are active.” In 1954 Everson as BCSP president endorsed a drive to obtain state legislation to ban the sale and use of switchblade knives, widely associated with youth gang wars.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Much of Everson’s activity was philanthropic and administrative, but she also insisted on investigating conditions for herself. For example, as chairwoman of the BBC’s Family Services Committee in 1940, Everson led her ten-member committee in a study of 119 cases of delinquent Brooklyn boys who were passing through the city’s Children’s Court system. Everson and her associates attended court hearings for the children, and the committee’s report, delivered to the presiding judge of the Court of Domestic Relations, concluded that the court needed a larger budget to train its probation officers, and also that families had insufficient knowledge of the social services that might have saved their children from entry into the criminal justice system. “Parents came to the court,” Everson stated in an interview, “because they did not know where else to go. They were not aware of the various agencies which could be of service to them.”[[79]](#endnote-79)

The need for publicity to ameliorate social isolation and generate community engagement continued to be a theme of her organizational work. In 1954, for example, when she was BCSP’s president, the agency issued a publication entitled “Welcome to Brooklyn,” in effect a “Handbook for New Workers.” As a *Daily Eagle* writer noted of it, “there are charts, figures and other information on health centers, housing projects, public buildings, public officials---almost everything a new worker might want to know about except—the Dodgers.”[[80]](#endnote-80)

**Lisbeth Higgins Hamm**

While Tracy and Rachel competed in equestrian events as teenagers during the 1910s, their younger sister Lisbeth (or “Liza”), a student at Packer Institute and then the Brooklyn Heights Seminary, was not far behind. At the Annual Horse Show of the Islip (Long Island) Polo Club in July 1918, fourteen-year-old “Miss Lisbeth Higgins, Smithtown,” exhibited her horse Winchester while her brother Tracy exhibited his Kitty May. Fifteen-year-old Lisbeth was the cover girl for the February 28, 1920 issue of *Brooklyn Life*, which noted that she had ridden her own bay mare Salena to win the blue ribbon for “horses under fifteen hands” at the recent Horse Show of the Riding and Driving Club (see Image 101). Lisbeth and Tracy respectively showed Salena and Kitty May again at the club’s April 1920 show, and Lisbeth rode once more in the club’s April 1922 show (see Image 102). In May 1924 she rode her horse Fandango in the Fort Hamilton (Brooklyn) horse show; the following year, she was listed on the Fort Hamilton’s show’s organizing committee and as a patron along with her parents, and also exhibited her horse Arabesque (see Images 103 and 104). Her sister Rachel was “hostess” in the box taken by their parents for the event. At the Piping Rock horse show in October 1925, Lisbeth, “usually an exhibitor herself, took an afternoon off and watched the show from the side lines” (see Images 105 and 106). In May 1927, she attended the Fort Hamilton horse show again, but evidently did not ride or exhibit a horse.[[81]](#endnote-81)

Lisbeth also participated in a round of society events, most of them Brooklyn-based, as befitted a young woman of her family position. Becoming a hostess of formal luncheons, dinners, and charitable events was part of her training for Brooklyn adulthood. As President of the Class of 1922 at the Brooklyn Heights Seminary, she assisted the Principal, Miss Florence Greer, in throwing the Senior Prom at the school (18 Pierrepont Street) on February 10, 1922; Lisbeth also gave a dinner in honor of the graduating class at the Montauk Club. In June, at the school’s Class Day, Lisbeth was awarded “the much-coveted Rome scholarship, which entitles the holder to a course at Miss Moxley’s School at Rome with a cash prize of $500 for expenses.” She also served as a bridesmaid at weddings and hosted and attended luncheons and dinners for newly affianced or married female friends (see Images 107-109).[[82]](#endnote-82)

By age eighteen in 1922, she was also entitled to entertain formally and have her private social activities reported in the *Daily Eagle*’s “Brooklyn Society” column and in *Brooklyn Life* magazine. Thus on December 24, under the headline “New Social Apex Reached In Fortnight of Parties Preceding Balls and Dances,” the *Eagle* ran a subhead, “Miss Lisbeth Higgins to be Dinner Hostess,” and a paragraph typical of others on the same page: “Preceding Miss Elizabeth Fish’s ball at the Casino Thursday evening Miss Lisbeth Higgins will entertain at dinner at her home, 101 Prospect Park West. Her guests will be Miss Cornelia Livingston, Miss Beatrice Cantwell [a classmate from the Brooklyn Heights Seminary], Miss Eileen Cantwell, Jerry Collins, Gerard Smith, Edward Smith, Tracy Higgins.” In January 1923, she was one of five Cio-Cio Sans (a character from Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*) serving guests at an “Oriental luncheon and bridge” thrown by Mrs. Edward P. Morse in her home at 47 Plaza Street as a benefit for the Hopewell Society, formerly known as the Home for Friendless Women and Children.[[83]](#endnote-83)

Lisbeth formally debuted in society with a dinner hosted by her parents at Sherry’s in Manhattan on December 21, 1923, which *Brooklyn Life* predicted would “be one of the most brilliant coming out parties of the season.” On November 28 she was one of six debutantes (including Cornelia Livingston, Beatrice Cantwell, and Lisbeth’s friend Elizabeth Deyer) on the receiving line at the Debutante Ball at the Heights Casino, which “ushered in the winter season”(see Images 110-111).[[84]](#endnote-84)

**Lisbeth Higgins’s Dancing Career**

But Lisbeth Higgins’s true passion was dance and show business. Suffering from gastritis at age twelve, she took up dancing after a doctor recommended exercise for her health. One may speculate that her interest in the performing arts and the stage were inspired or even directly encouraged by her mother who, after all, had studied voice and performed as a contralto as a young woman. Whatever its source, by her late teens Lisbeth was stagestruck. At age sixteen in 1920, she performed in a play at the Brooklyn Heights Seminary, and various theatrical and dance performances followed. These included a “Pirates” number and a “minuet-solo dance” in “The Parada of 1921,” a theatrical benefit at the Masonic Temple organized by the Junior League and the Social Service Department of the Brooklyn Hospital, and in February 1922 a special solo dance at a dinner dance benefit at the Hotel Bossert for the Music School Settlement, in which she performed Strauss’s Blue Danube Waltz and a “character dance,” The Congo. Later in the year she was performing with an amateur group, the Clark Street Players; in December she performed in “Back to Cleopatra,” a show put on at the Academy of Music for the School Settlement (see Image 112). *Brooklyn Life* reported that in dual roles “Lisbeth Higgins made *Lotusa* a real dancing girl… The Spanish Portrait, Lisbeth Higgins, like the little Dutch figures, came to life for a brief time, and with Porta Povich, did an Argentine Tango.” She told *Brooklyn Life* in November 1923 that “perhaps you know that I am putting my best endeavor into becoming a graceful, artful, mirthful coryphee.” That year she started studying at Nelle’s, a dance school on West 58th Street in Manhattan.[[85]](#endnote-85)

By August 1924, “with the heartiest approval of her parents,” Lisbeth was performing on the Broadway stage as an entre’acte dancer in a revival of the melodrama *Sweeney Todd* (not to be confused with the later musical of the same name). In February 1925, with her mother in attendance, she performed two numbers, “a soft shoe dance done to ‘I’m A Little Jazz Bird’… followed by a buck dance done to the strains of ‘Eliza”at an “Informal” evening at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The following month *Brooklyn Life* described her as “Brooklyn society’s premiere danseuse” (see Image 113). In an interview published on March 22 by the *Daily Eagle*, Lisbeth explained that “I want to dance because I like dancing better than everything else in the world. And I am going to keep at it… You have to be able to dance to make a Broadway chorus in these times. And you have to be attractive looking and have a lot of pep… It usually takes about six years of hard work, study and experience before a chorus girl, regardless of her talents, can command leads.”[[86]](#endnote-86)

In June 1925, she was dancing twice weekly in a cabaret at the Hotel Shelburne near Coney Island in a revue managed by her dance teacher, Ned Wayburn, a noted Manhattan choreographer (see Image 114). In January 1926 she and a partner, Henry W. Herrman, began appearing “at tea-dancing time, from 4 to 6,” at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Manhattan, where they featured the Ballroom Charleston (see Image 115). By April 1927, however, Lisbeth had a new dance partner, Cesar Romero. As he later recalled, they billed themselves as “Lisbeth and Romero, Aristocrats of the Dance.” That month, she appeared with him at the Bal des Fileuses, an annual dance for singles she had helped to initiate at the Ritz-Carlton the preceding year: “Miss Lisbeth Higgins and her dancing partner, Cesar Romero, executed three very charming dances, displaying a great deal of grace and professional agility.”[[87]](#endnote-87)

As Romero, the New York-born son of prosperous Cuban immigrants, later remembered it, “I was working in a bank when Lisbeth suggested [that we perform together]. I thought dancing was fun.” In May 1927, the duo performed before an audience of 12,000 people (including Mayor Jimmy Walker) in the spectacular pageant “The Thousand and One Knights and Ladies,” mounted in Madison Square Garden by Lila Agnew Stewart with help from Florenz Ziegfeld. As *Brooklyn Life* described it,

some thousand persons, camels, oxen, donkeys and beautiful white horses composed the cast and the entrances to the Garden were always thronged with stately ladies in waiting, troubadours, black bottom dancers, Princes of Persia, negro slaves, occasional gypsies and what not… A square platform was erected in the middle of the arena and on this many of the specialties were performed. Miss Lisbeth Higgins and Cesar Romero gave a very well executed tango while the Spanish singers wandered aroung the ring. Lisbeth wore a very charming dancing gown with a black tulle skirt and silver bodice.[[88]](#endnote-88)

By August, the partners were dancing nightly at the Park Central Hotel and also were headliners of the Keith-Albee vaudeville for a week. But Cesar Romero left dancing for Hollywood, debuting in the thriller *The Shadow Laughs* in 1933 and, over the following decades, enjoying a career as a “Latin lover”in movies and as the villainous “Joker” on the TV series *Batman* (1966-1968). Decades after Lisbeth Higgins first introduced him to show business, she surprised Romero as the mystery guest from his past on the television show *This Is Your Life* (1952-1961).

By March 1928, Lisbeth had a new partner, Music Box Revue and Greenwich Village Follies veteran George R. Clifford, a fact trumpeted by a captioned photograph that appeared in at least six daily newspapers across the country—in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Utah, and California (see Images 116-119). The photograph, credited to the “NEA New York Bureau” (the News Enterprise Association, a service providing syndicated material for the Scripps newspaper chain), distorted the facts with typical 1920s public relations “ballyhoo.” Under the heading “Broadway’s Dancing Heiress,” the caption read: “Lisbeth Higgins, only child and heiress of Charles M. Higgins, millionaire ink manufacturer, is the latest notable to come to Broadway, as a dancer at a night club. Here she is with her partner, George Clifford.” More publicity followed in July 1928, when papers in Olean, New York; Zanesville, Ohio; Scranton, Pennsylvania; Bismarck, North Dakota; and San Mateo, California all published a syndicated piece on the duo performing regularly at “one of the most exclusive rooftop dance clubs,” that of the Park Central Hotel. In this way Lisbeth, like other publicized performing artists, exemplified the glamour and sophistication of New York City for readers across the country.[[89]](#endnote-89)

Lisbeth and George Clifford were still performing together in early 1929, dancing at the Deauville Casino in Miami Beach nightly during January, and at a dance club on West 56th Street in March. Although Lisbeth may have taken a break from dancing during the early 1930s—press coverage seems to dwindle during those years—in January 1934 she was dancing nightly at the Embassy Club with another partner, James Struthers, and in March 1935 with Charles Conkling at Le Boeuf Sur Le Toit in Manhattan. Thereafter, marriage and motherhood ended her dancing career.

An interesting aspect of Lisbeth’s career is its role in helping to bring new forms of popular dance and music to the American public through the incubator of New York City’s vibrant Broadway stage and nightclub culture during the “Roaring Twenties.” Following World War I, Lisbeth’s generation (and Americans slightly older and younger) revolutionized American popular culture. Illegal drinking that flouted the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1920), women winning the vote through the 19th Amendment (also 1920), Jazz music disseminated by records and radio, less inhibited sexual mores, new dance steps, haircuts, and sartorial fashions, and a general sense that women were emancipating themselves from old Victorian codes of “modesty” and subservience: all of these factors redefined popular manners and expectations during the 1920s. When the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* profiled Lisbeth in 1925, it was picturing the jaunty “flapper”: “Miss Higgins strolls along Broadway with a gold anklet gleaming around her right ankle… outside her flesh colored hose.”[[90]](#endnote-90)

While new, more “risque” fashions and styles generated tensions between the younger and older generations, not all parents frowned on the innovations. In an article on “Three Views of the Flapper” in April 1922, the *Daily Eagle* interviewed Lisbeth’s mother, Mrs. Charles M. Higgins. Father Fransioli’s niece offered her judicious appraisal of the younger generation, obviously with her own children in mind:

“In my opinion, the modern girl is not flippant, she is too self-confident. There is no difference in her attitude and that of her brother toward religion, marriage and their elders,” declares Mrs. Higgins. “I approve of the modern style of dress. It is a sane and wholesome one when worn for health. It is not immodest and has not, as a whole, had a deleterious effect on morals… As to drink, I do not think young people drink more now than their parents did when they were young. But young people drink more now than they did before prohibition… Late hours are undoubtedly more common now at parties and dances than a generation ago. The use of the rouge, the lip stick and the eyebrow pencil, as well as the cigarette, are habits acquired by the average girl, the exception being a rarity… I believe that the average boy does refuse to dance with or pay attentions to a girl who does not pet, smoke and drink—but not the average man. I agree with Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis that the younger generation of today is no worse than the younger generation of a generation ago… The only remedies for these conditions of which we disapprove are, as one might put it, pre-natal discipline for parents and post-natal education for children,” concludes Mrs. Higgins*.*[[91]](#endnote-91)

Alexandrina Fransioli had come a long way from the rural Roman Catholic village of her childhood in Ticino during the 1870s to the Brooklyn of 1922 by way of Father Fransioli’s parish. (Perhaps significantly for her viewpoint, Father Fransioli himself had weighed in on social dancing in 1889, when various clergymen raised questions about the moral propriety of the upcoming Inauguration Ball in Washington for president-elect Benjamin Harrison: “Dancing itself is not sinful,” Fransioli told a reporter, “but is at times made so by circumstance.”) Her tolerance extended to encouraging her daughter’s independent performing career, and Charles Higgins evidently also acquiesced. “I was fortunate in having rare parents who offered none of the old-fashioned objections that parents can dig up when a daughter is inclined to go on the stage,” Lisbeth reflected in 1935. “’I have always believed in perfect liberty for my children,’” her mother noted in a 1929 interview, discussing Lisbeth’s late night forays into Manhattan from their shared home at 101 Prospect Park West: “‘If a girl has character, she can be trusted anywhere. If she hasn’t, where can she be trusted?’”[[92]](#endnote-92)

Prohibition (1920-1933)—and the widespread drinking that flouted it—provided the backdrop for much of Lisbeth’s show business career. “’No, I have never happened to be in a night club when it was raided,’” she told a reporter in 1929, “‘I’ve never had that experience… but I’ve been in threatened clubs. Matters have always been satisfactorily adjusted,’ and the Brooklyn society girl laughed her very infectious laugh.” Father Fransioli’s grand-niece lived in a new and modern Brooklyn, just as her mother did.[[93]](#endnote-93)

With her dance choices, Lisbeth was also clearly at the cutting edge of a new urban popular culture as the 1920s unfolded, one in which New York City played a leading part. Such dances as the Congo (presumably expressing some idealized form of African “primitivism”) and the Tango revealed a level of physical and sexual openness that would have been impermissible in an earlier era governed by Victorian rules of public deportment and decency. Lisbeth was part of the cultural movement that elevated “low” African American artforms, notably Jazz music and dances such as the Charleston and Black Bottom, to mass popularity via New York’s nationally and globally influential theaters, dance halls, and nightclubs. Lisbeth had studied dance at the Manhattan school run by Ned Wayburn, who contemporaries and scholars both credited with bringing the Charleston to mainstream (meaning white) attention. As Lisbeth herself explained to a reporter in 1926,

As it should be danced, the Charleston is beautiful, with nothing in it objectionable. Dancers are sometimes at fault with it, but the dance itself is not to blame. Ned Wayburn, to whom the dance came about three years ago… emphatically favors it when done correctly, and he should know how, having introduced it in the Follies and improved and developed it since. [Noble] Sissle and [Eubie] Blake, colored stars of ‘Shuffle Along,’ brought to [Ned Wayburn] a colored boy of 12 in return for a kindness Mr. Wayburn had done them. The boy had picked up, on the Mississippi levees, a step with an off-time beat. Mr. Wayburn developed this into more than 20 different ways of dancing. The latest innovation is the Ballroom Charleston, which is more stimulating and graceful than even the tango and, in my opinion, as in Mr. Wayburn’s, is destined to be the dance of the future.[[94]](#endnote-94)

In addition to Wayburn’s use of it in Ziegfeld’s Follies, the Charleston gained widespread popularity in 1923-1924 through its association with the song of the same name by the Harlem “stride” pianist James P. Johnson, as performed in the all-black musical comedy “Runnin’ Wild” on Broadway. As one review noted of the show, it “excels in eccentric dancing—some of the most exciting steps of the season (though steps is not always the right word, for knees are used more often than ankles).” Lisbeth herself studied with Billy Pierce, a Manhattan-based African American choreographer credited with having developed the Black Bottom as a popular social dance, and who trained other white performers, including the Broadway actor-dancer Clifton Webb, to use “Harlem” dance steps.[[95]](#endnote-95)

In January 1926, Lisbeth danced in a Charleston exhibition at a fund-raising event for the Junior Guild of Colony House, the social settlement in whose affairs her sister Rachel would become so active. Two weeks later she danced it again at a Brooklyn Woman’s Club event with other dancers (see Image 120). At a Christmas 1926 supper-dance benefit for the Prospect Heights Hospital and Brooklyn Maternity Hospital held aboard the S.S. *Olympic*, “a black bottom was skillfully executed by Miss Lisbeth Higgins in a shimmering gown of sequins,” according to *Brooklyn Life.[[96]](#endnote-96)*

Lisbeth told a newspaperman in 1926 that “my aim, eventually, is to be a musical comedy star,” but she was realistic about the difficulties of becoming one. In 1929 she noted that “there are anywhere from 300 to 500 young, pretty and talented girls from all over the world in competition with you for every engagement you land… You not only have to have tremendous will power, you have to have originality, something that will differentiate you from every other competitor.” To that end, she emphasized self-expression in her dance numbers. In working up steps, she and George Clifford “will be attracted by a certain piece of music, for instance, and we will have it played over and over. Some trick in the rhythm will fascinate. The groundwork must be merely the background for the imagination of the dancer. Or perhaps we will be fooling around at a rehearsal and an idea for a new step occurs. We develop it.”[[97]](#endnote-97)

**Higgins and Hamm**

Marriage and motherhood ended Lisbeth’s show business career. In April 1931 Lisbeth was engaged to William Corthell Gahagan, son of Mrs. Walter H. Gahagan of 17 Prospect Park West, and the wedding was set for May 9. But evidently the wedding was called off. On June 22, 1935, she married Dr. Frank Coleman Hamm (1901--1987) in her mother’s apartment at 35 Prospect Park West (see Image 121). Hamm had been born and raised in Belle Plaine, Iowa. According to the 1920 Federal Census, 18-year-old Frank Hamm was living in Fairbury City, Nebraska with his father John A. Hamm (an Illinois-born railroad carpenter and son of a German-speaking immigrant from Alsace-Lorraine and his Irish-born wife), his mother Anne B. Hamm (also born in Illinois, the daughter of Irish immigrants), his three sisters (two born in Iowa, one in Illinois) and his uncle, his father’s brother William, a bridge carpenter. According to family tradition Frank Hamm’s grandfather, the Alsatian immigrant, became an engineer and surveyor working for railroads across the Great Plains of the West during the late 19th century. Frank Hamm studied medicine at the University of Michigan and then spent time in the mid-1920s at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where he was a Fellow in Urology. He also interned at Kings County Hospital in 1927 and had probably already been in the New York City area earlier: a “Dr. Frank C. Hamm” is mentioned as a guest at a party in Jamaica Estates in October 1926.[[98]](#endnote-98)

According to his son Charles, Hamm accepted the offer of a wealthy patient that he accompany the patient’s son as a companion on a “Grand Tour” of Europe. His name and birth date appear on the passenger list of the ocean liner *Scythia* which arrived in New York on September 8, 1928 after a nine-day passage from Liverpool; Hamm gave his place of residence at that time as Fairbury, Nebraska. Upon his return from the Continent he decided to settle in Brooklyn for good. By the time of his marriage in 1935 he was attending urologist at the Bushwick Hospital and assistant urologist at the Brooklyn Hospital and St. Mary’s Hospital. Hamm became a prominent urologist and authority and writer in his field. He taught at the State University College of Medicine in Brooklyn, where in 1956 he became full professor in the Department of Surgery. Among other publications, he wrote a urology textbook in 1957 and co-authored another in 1962.

According to their son Charles Hamm, the couple was introduced by Lisbeth’s relative, Margarita Fransioli Quinn, who was a nurse and clinic secretary. They had two sons, Frank Jr. and Charles; on two occasions the two boys were pictured with their mother in the pages of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* (see Images 122 and 123)*.*  In 1937 and 1939, the Hamms were living at 35 Prospect Park West, Lisbeth’s home address since 1930, but in 1940 they were living in rented quarters at 160 Henry Street with their young sons and two servants, May Anne [or June] Ohrn, born in Ohio, and Mary Behney, born in the “Irish Free State.” During World War II, Dr. Hamm served in the Army Medical Corps. As his son Charles Hamm remembered, “my father joined the Army as a major in the Medical Corps, and we traveled to various military hospitals in the U.S. before he was ordered overseas. We lived in Cambridge, Ohio … [then] Atlanta, Georgia. He was ordered overseas, so we came back to New York, but then the war ended, and he came back… and resumed practice and resumed raising us.”[[99]](#endnote-99)

By late 1945, the Hamms were back in Brooklyn and Dr. Hamm owned 77 Columbia Heights, one of the venerable Brooklyn Heights townhouses overlooking the East River and lower Manhattan. In 1876, it had been home to Edward Bowne Willets (1837-1916), a merchant listed with businesses on Pearl Street and Cliff Street in Manhattan; his wife Sarah Frances Carman Willets (born 1839); and their three children, Anglessia, Anna, and Edward Jr. The Willets were descendants of distinguished Queens and Brooklyn Quaker families whose local origins went back to 17th-century Dutch New Netherland. According to the 1921 *Brooklyn Blue Book and Long Island Society Register*, the widowed Mrs. Willets and Edward Jr. still lived in the house. By 1936, the house appears to have been the home or at least the mail drop of Ronald Lane Lattimer (also known as James Leippert), a rather mysterious literary figure who owned the Alcestis Press and published modernist poetry. Lattimer was a correspondent of most of the leading American poets of the era, including Wallace Stevens, Brooklyn’s own Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams, and he published the work of Stevens, Williams, and others. In December 1945, Dr. Hamm filed to have the three-story house remodeled as a one-family home, paying architect George Alexander, Jr. $3,000 to do the alterations.

By the 1940s and 1950s, Brooklyn Heights had a decided reputation as a “mixed” neighborhood bordering on the docks “down below”and the industrial area immediately to its north. While some 19th-century rowhouses remained the homes of genteel “Old Brooklyn” families, others had become rooming houses for students, workers, sailors, and transients. By the World War II era, writers and artists (including the group occupying “February House” at 7 Middagh Street) were discovering the neighborhood with its affordable rents and cultural ambiance.

In the postwar era, arriving middle-class and affluent professional families (including those already with Brooklyn roots such as the Hamms-Higginses) were to play a role in the district’s gradual revival. During the early years of her married life, Lisbeth had continued to participate in the civic and fund-raising activities that had become a hallmark for the female members of her family. In 1938, for example, she was a member of the Junior Guild of Colony House, and in 1940 she was a hostess for a benefit by the Junior Committee of the Brooklyn Home for Children. During the war, in 1942, she was featured as a “manikin” the annual fashion show of the School Settlement Association (see Image 124). Following the war, while continuing to raise her children, she took part in 1949 in an open-house benefit for Friendly House Camp, welcoming visitors to 77 Columbia Heights who admired the watercolors she had recently started to paint, and in 1952 she was chair of the United Hospital Fund teams raising money for the Brooklyn Hospital.[[100]](#endnote-100)

It is also perhaps significant that by 1950, Lisbeth Higgins Hamm, whose life had always been linked not only to Park Slope but also to Brooklyn Heights (where she attended school and socialized at the Heights Casino) was chairing the committee on arrangements for the Brooklyn Heights Association annual meeting held at the Casino. Already in 1943, the Association had worked with the Borough President’s office to help stop Robert Moses from building his Brooklyn-Queens Expressway through the center of the neighborhood. In the coming years, the Association would play a crucial role in the protection of the district’s architectural heritage, the growing landmarks preservation movement citywide and nationwide, and ultimately in the passage of the city’s Landmarks Preservation Law in 1965. Lisbeth Higgins Hamm’s involvement with the Brooklyn Heights Association—like the volunteer work she and her sister Rachel performed for the borough’s social service agencies—thus were part of a legacy, echoing the civic engagement of her father Charles M. Higgins and her great-uncle Joseph Fransioli, both of whom demonstrated their love for Brooklyn by trying to improve life for its diverse population (see Image 125).

Over three generations, the Fransioli and Higgins families had experienced and contributed to Brooklyn’s history as the “City of Churches” became increasingly a city of European immigrants, an industrial hub, a community facing the problems of rapid growth, and a borough of the nation’s and world’s largest metropolis. Father Joseph Fransioli and Charles M. Higgins literally helped build Brooklyn in the process of forging their own careers. They provided for the sustenance of immigrants, participated in the city’s “industrial revolution,” and plunged into urban activism for the public good. This civic commitment became a legacy to children and grandchildren. A century of residence in Brooklyn saw members of the two families engaged in almost every aspect of Kings County affairs—parish-, school-, and hospital-building, the temperance movement, poverty relief, manufacturing, transit reform, bank rescue, historic preservation, social work, child welfare, the performing arts, and more. Their intertwined stories tell us much about how passionately individual Brooklynites—immigrants, their children, and grandchildren—transformed their home city and borough to enhance its stature, foster its institutions, and make it a more liveable place for all.

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