

Highlighting Dobbs Ferry and its history

the

Ferrymen

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The night a bomb rocked Cedar Street

By Seamus Breathnach

In the early morning darkness of September 12, 1933, an explosion shattered the quiet of downtown Dobbs Ferry.

At approximately 3:35 a.m., a bomb was detonated in the foyer of the Embassy Theatre on Cedar Street. The resulting explosion wrecked the theater entrance, shattered storefront windows along the block, damaged some 15 nearby buildings, and sent frightened residents rushing into the street in their nightclothes.

Newspapers described the explosion as having “rocked the neighborhood.” Reports identified the explosive as a nitroglycerine bomb and estimated the property loss at \$10,000.

Fortunately, despite the violence of the blast, no one was seriously injured.

The bombing was not an isolated act of vandalism. It was the dramatic climax of a bitter labor dispute that had been simmering at the Embassy for weeks.

This attack was part of a wave of violence throughout the country between union members and independent theater owners that permeated the early 1930s. Kansas City, Detroit, Portland Oregon, and Grand Rapids Michigan were just some of the cities where picketing and protest turned into bombings.

A Theater Labor Dispute

The Embassy Theatre, which had opened in 1928, was owned at the time by Fatzler &



Bombed out theater: Patrolmen Edward Coffey and Herb Olsen search through the debris outside the theater (Photo: The Herald Statesman)

Company of Newark, New Jersey. Its local manager was D. J. Shepherd who lived in East Orange, New Jersey.

The Dobbs Ferry dispute apparently began in earnest in early July of that year.

Two union motion-picture operators, Frank Brett and Charles Scappa, refused to take a pay cut from management and lost their jobs at the Embassy. Management replaced them with one non-union operator who performed the work done by the two men and was paid only about one-quarter of their combined wages.

Brett and Scappa belonged to Local 250 of the motion-picture operators' union, headquartered in Yonkers.

Their dismissal brought picketing to Cedar Street and began a period of escalating disturbances around the theater.

Trouble Before the Bomb

The Embassy had already been the target of several incidents before the bombing.

A few days after the union operators left their jobs, an attempt was made to damage

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the theater, although only several windows were broken.

The following week, vandals succeeded in destroying the Embassy's motion-picture screen, valued at \$600.

Then came another attempt. Because of the continuing trouble, the Dobbs Ferry Police Department took the precaution of stationing a police officer inside the Embassy. Three weeks before the bombing, patrolman Thomas Brennan, on guard duty at the theater, encountered intruders and fired two shots into the air, apparently frightening them away before additional damage could be done.

Beginning on August 30, Patrolman Edward Coffey was assigned to guard the building overnight.

3:35 in the Morning

In the early morning hours of the bombing, Coffey was alone inside the theater.

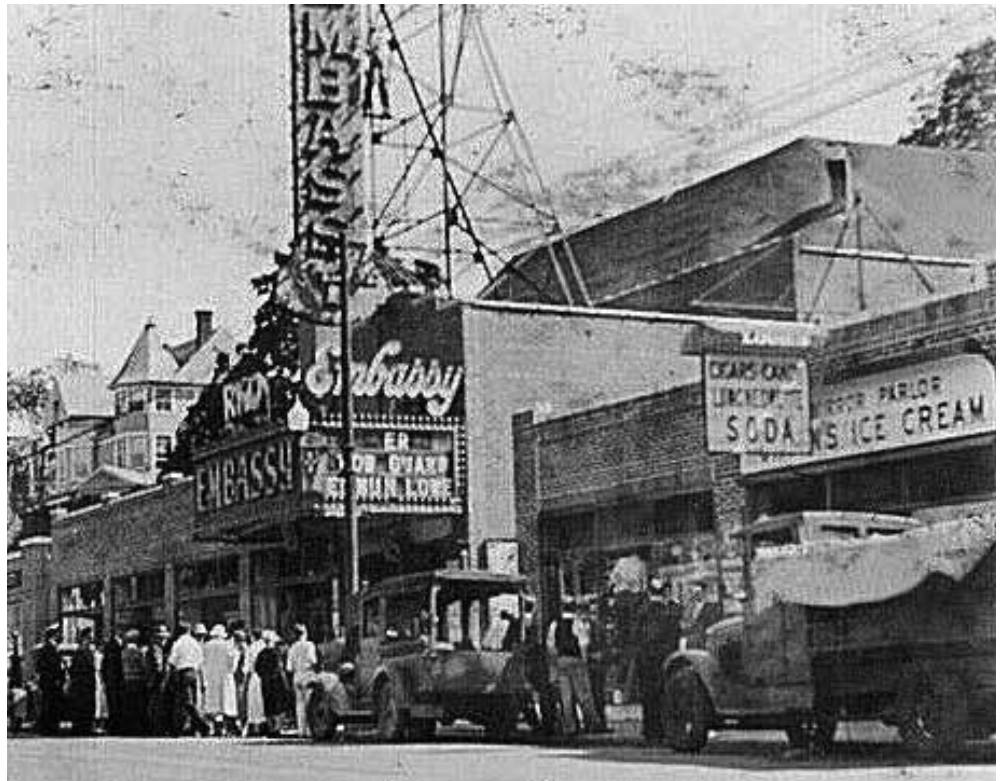
At approximately 3:35 a.m., he heard an automobile slow down in front of the Embassy. Suspicious, Coffey began moving toward the front entrance to investigate. Then came the explosion.

The blast demolished the theater's outside doors and sent wreckage and debris flying through the lobby. The force piled debris against Coffey and knocked him to the ground.

Remarkably, he escaped serious physical injury. The concussion of the explosion did, however, leave Coffey temporarily deaf.

The ticket booth outside the lobby, where the bomb was thought to have been placed, was hurled across Cedar Street and ended up crashing through the windows of the Dobbs Ferry Garage.

There was an eerie coincidence about the hour selected for the attack. Approximately 3:35 a.m. was the time when a film-delivery truck ordinarily stopped at the Embassy every other morning to collect or deliver motion-picture reels. But that particular morning was not a scheduled pickup day.



The Embassy Theatre

Cedar Street Shattered

Although the theater absorbed the direct force of the explosion, the damage extended far beyond its confines.

Among the properties damaged were the Pasquale Connola building, the People's Market, the Nurses' Headquarters, the Dobbs Ferry Taxi Company, Blasberg Motors, and the New Rochelle Water Company office, along with other neighboring stores and businesses.

Nearby Zion Episcopal Church reported a crack in a church wall.

Residents sleeping in apartments and houses nearby were jolted awake. Fearing that additional bombs might explode, men, women and children hurried outside.

The Village Responds

Among the first civilians arriving at the scene were Chamber of Commerce president Louis Basha and Charles Napoli, who lived on opposite sides of the theater. They were soon joined by village officials including Mayor Joseph J. Walker, and Police Chief Patrick Costello.

Within a short time, approximately 200 residents had gathered.



Pasquale Connola and his children stand outside his building at 60 Cedar St. in this 1917 photograph. The building was damaged by the bombing

Mayor Walker reportedly characterized the bombing as: "the worst thing that ever happened in Dobbs Ferry."

Basha described the bombing as an "outrage against the citizens of the village." He recognized that the explosive apparently had not been intended to injure residents but pointed out that whoever threw it had shown

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remarkably little concern for the safety of the people living around the theater.

Suspicion Falls on the Labor Dispute

Given the preceding weeks of picketing and vandalism, attention immediately focused on the labor controversy.

But union officials firmly denied involvement. A spokesperson for Local 250 in Yonkers, the union to which the discharged projectionists belonged, said: "We do not sanction acts of violence."

The union leaders said they knew nothing about the bombing and were willing to cooperate with authorities investigating it. They offered a \$1,000 reward for the apprehension and conviction of those involved in the attack.

The NRA Comes to Dobbs Ferry

At the time of the bombing efforts were already underway to settle the dispute. After the explosion, the National Recovery Administration (NRA), one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's major early New Deal initiatives, entered the negotiations to mediate the stalemate.

Grover A. Whalen, former New York City police commissioner and an important figure in New York's NRA activities, became involved in efforts to mediate the Dobbs Ferry controversy. Whalen was renting the Castle on Beacon Hill at the time.

A meeting with the NRA Compliance Committee was scheduled for Friday September 15th to consider the case and attempt to settle the dispute.

Picketing Continues

Despite the bombing—and despite the public alarm—the labor dispute did not instantly disappear.

Pickers were again outside the Embassy the day after the bombing, much to the consternation of some members of the crowd. At least one picketer was arrested and subsequently released.

Dobbs Ferry residents did not abandon their movie house. Reports indicate that

attendance at the Embassy remained approximately the same during the entire dispute.

On Wednesday following the bombing, actor and Hastings resident Minor Watson, attended a screening of the newly released MGM drama *Another Language*, in which he appeared.

Patrolmen Brennan and Coffy would continue to serve the police department. Brennan would become Dobbs Ferry's police chief and later would take a similar position in Bronxville. Coffey's son, John Coffey, would later join the Dobbs Ferry Police Department and rise to the rank of chief.



Grover Whalen (center)

From vaudeville to a new stage

When the Embassy Theatre opened on Cedar Street on November 20, 1928, it was a vaudeville house. Movies soon joined the bill and eventually became its main attraction, continuing until the theater closed for several years in the 1950s. The movie house would later reopen under a new name—the Pickwick Theatre.

In the early 1960s, Dobbs Ferry became the scene of two short-lived attempts, a year apart, to establish live theater in Westchester County. Each lasted only a season. On July 9, 1963, the Westchester County Playhouse opened to much fanfare. Billed as the county's first year-round legitimate theater, it presented one-week engagements of Broadway-bound productions.

The building had been refurbished with a new stage, dressing rooms, and renovated seating. Performances ran Tuesday through Sunday. Opening night drew a capacity crowd of residents, public officials, and theatergoers, welcomed by director and actor Cyril Ritchard, celebrated for his portrayal of Captain Hook in a recent television production of *Peter Pan*. Among the performers who later appeared there were Mickey Rooney, Dana Andrews, and Earl Holliman. Weeknight tickets cost \$2.90 and \$3.90, with weekend seats a dollar more.



The theater today

In 1964, the venue operated as The Theater in Westchester, but by the mid-1960s the Pickwick was again showing movies. During the 1970s the theater spent several years as an adult art house before turning to double features in an effort to attract larger audiences. The Pickwick finally closed in 1982.

In 1991, Stolen Moments Entertainment purchased the theater and four adjoining storefronts, converting the complex into music rehearsal, recording, and performance space.

In 2025, Dobbs Ferry received a \$4.5 million New York State downtown revitalization grant, including funding intended to return the historic Cedar Street theater to public use as a performance space.

The Gilded Age Mansion at The Masters School

Few buildings in Dobbs Ferry capture the grandeur of the Gilded Age as dramatically as Estherwood, the magnificent French-inspired château that stands on the campus of The Masters School. With its imposing exterior and remarkably elaborate interiors, Estherwood reflects an era when wealthy Americans looked to the great houses of Europe for architectural inspiration.

Today, Estherwood remains one of Westchester County's finest surviving examples of the Châteauesque architectural style and an important reminder of the man whose generosity helped shape both The Masters School and the Village of Dobbs Ferry.

James Jennings McComb

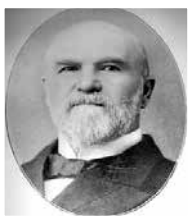
Estherwood was built in 1894–1895 for James Jennings McComb, an industrialist and real estate investor whose fortune was connected to an invention that helped revolutionize the cotton industry: wire ties used to bind cotton bales.

Born in Mansfield, Ohio, in 1829, McComb traveled to California at the age of 20 during the Gold Rush. Finding life there difficult, he eventually turned eastward and became involved in the cotton business. He later moved to England, where he lived for approximately 15 years. His first wife, Mary Frances Rayne, died in England in 1874. Together they had four children, Mary Alice, Fannie Rayne, Lillie, and Jennings Scott McComb. After her death he returned to America with his children.

Settling in New York City, McComb continued his business and real estate interests. Among his investments was the Navarro apartment complex, an ambitious group of luxury apartment buildings near Central Park South.

McComb's connection with Dobbs Ferry developed through his interest in the education of his daughters. The Misses Masters Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies and Children, established by Eliza Masters in 1877 in the village, offered the type of education he sought for them.

In 1881, McComb purchased approximately 23 acres from Dr. Ryder on Clinton Avenue and moved to the village. The property



Estherwood. Inset: James Jennings McComb

was conveniently located within walking distance of the school, then located in the Wilde House on Broadway, today the home of Days of Wonder Child Care for Children.

The McComb family initially occupied the large residence already standing on the property. McComb lived there with his children and his second wife, Mary Esther Wood. He named the house Estherwood in her honor.

McComb soon became one of the most important benefactors in the early history of The Masters School. When Eliza Masters considered relocating her school to Irvington, McComb intervened. He purchased property adjoining his estate and constructed buildings for the school, beginning with what became known as First House and Second House. He leased the buildings to the school for a nominal rent, and additional structures followed as the school expanded.

Without McComb's support, The Masters School might well have left Dobbs Ferry.

Building a French Château in Dobbs Ferry

One of McComb's prized possessions was an unusual octagonal desk he had acquired during his travels. To accommodate it, he had an octagonal library added to his original Dobbs Ferry residence. In time,

however, he became dissatisfied with the addition and decided that he wanted a grander home and a more impressive setting for his library.

McComb commissioned architect Albert Buchman to design a larger and grander residence. Although much of Buchman's career involved commercial and institutional architecture, he understood what his client wanted.

The resulting three-and-a-half-story residence is a striking example of French Renaissance architecture. With its massive masonry walls, steep roofline, prominent chimneys, dormers, projecting bays, oriel windows, decorative finials, porte-cochere, and copper-cupola, Buchman designed features that combine to give Estherwood the appearance of a French château. If the exterior announced McComb's wealth, the interior confirmed it.

Inside Estherwood

Visitors entering Estherwood during the McComb years would immediately have encountered the extraordinary level of craftsmanship that characterized the house. The vestibule was finished with mosaic tile flooring, marble baseboards, classical moldings, and bronze lighting fixtures. Pink and green marble and gold leaf appear throughout the building.

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The Gilded Age...

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Beyond the entrance was the spectacular Great Hall, approximately 65 feet long and rising through two stories beneath a richly coffered ceiling illuminated by skylights. A broad divided marble staircase led upward to a second-floor gallery overlooking the hall. Opening from this central space were a series of rooms, each decorated in its own distinctive style.

The Library

The octagonal library was among the most unusual rooms in the mansion and reflected McComb's personal tastes. Mahogany shelving lined the room, while decorative plaster moldings accented with gold leaf added to its richness. A geometric ceiling design and stained-glass elements, including floral motifs, provided additional ornamentation.

An octagonal stained-glass skylight illuminated the room from above, creating a dramatic setting for McComb's books and his treasured desk.

The Dining Room

The dining room was designed to suggest the atmosphere of an old European banquet hall. Its walls were paneled in dark, heavily carved oak incorporating Northern European motifs, including carved boars' heads and rams' heads.

Bronze and copper wall sconces recalled medieval lighting fixtures, while the fireplace combined marble with an elaborate carved wooden surround.

The Music Room

The music room, traditionally known as the Red Room, was among Estherwood's most elegant spaces.

An alcove framed by red marble columns and pilasters provided a dramatic focal point. Adamesque swags and garlands, highlighted with gold, ornamented the walls and ceiling. Musical motifs appeared in the decorative plasterwork and stained-glass window transoms.

One wall was finished in mahogany with brass trim, adding another layer of richness to the room. A Steinway piano stood here,



The library



The Great Hall

making the room an appropriate setting for the musical entertainment.

The Reception Room

The reception room offered yet another variation on Estherwood's elaborate decorative scheme. Intricately patterned plasterwork covered the walls and ceiling, while an original crystal chandelier provided an elegant centerpiece.

McComb and Dobbs Ferry

James Jennings McComb's influence extended well beyond his estate and The Masters School. During his more than 20 years in Dobbs Ferry, he became an important benefactor of the village.

His financial contributions helped provide infrastructure that the growing community badly needed. He supported improvements to the sewer system, helped provide cleaner and more reliable water service, and contributed toward a modern village lighting system. He also served on the local school board and provided financial support to Dobbs Ferry Hospital.

Sadly, James and Mary Esther McComb enjoyed their magnificent new home together for only a few years.

James Jennings McComb died on March 31, 1901, at the age of seventy-two. Mary Esther died on July 2, 1901. They are buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

McComb was survived by his adult children. His son, J. Scott was a Dobbs

Ferry Village Trustee at the time of his parents' death.

Estherwood Becomes Part of The Masters School

Following McComb's death, his estate remained in the family for several years. In 1910, The Masters School purchased Estherwood and the surrounding McComb property from his heirs, incorporating the mansion into its expanding campus.

Over the years, the mansion has served the school in many ways. Its grand first-floor rooms have provided settings for concerts, receptions, lectures, meetings, weddings, and school and community gatherings. The upper floors were eventually adapted to provide faculty residences.

Although these changes were necessary to keep the building useful, many of Estherwood's most important original architectural and decorative features have survived.

A Recognized Landmark

In 1979, Estherwood and its associated carriage house were listed on the National Register of Historic Places, formally recognizing their architectural and historical significance.

The designation recognized the mansion's exceptional architectural style, its unusually intact decorative interiors, the rarity of French-inspired residential design in Westchester County, and its important association with James Jennings McComb and the history of The Masters School.

PERIAUGER: Dobbs Ferry High School's voyage through the years

For generations of Dobbs Ferry High School graduates, few objects evoke school days as immediately as the annual yearbook. Its pages preserve senior portraits, teachers, teams, clubs, dances, plays, class trips and countless other moments that otherwise might have disappeared from memory. The Dobbs Ferry yearbook also carries a name rooted in the history of the village itself: Periauger.

The 1946 Dobbs Ferry High School yearbook was the first time the name appeared. Before then, the school annual had been known by other names, including *Down the Corridor*. In 1946, however, the students looked beyond the school walls and into Dobbs Ferry's past for a name that would be distinctly their own.

The foreword to that first Periauger



explained the choice through the story of the village's namesake. "Once upon a time," it began, "there lived a man called Mr. Dobbs who operated a daily ferry across the Hudson River. The ferry service he established was a successful business and had a good reputation." According to the yearbook account, his ferry was an unpretentious but dependable periauger, a flat-bottomed watercraft of a type once familiar on local waterways.

The students had rediscovered this bit of local history and decided that Periauger was an especially fitting name for a school yearbook. Like the ferry setting off across the Hudson, the yearbook was bidding "bon voyage" to the graduating senior class as its members left Dobbs Ferry High School and embarked upon the next stage of their lives.

The connection between the yearbook and local history was important enough that later editions periodically retold the story. The 1954 edition displayed a nautical compass on its cover and included the story at the beginning of the book. Its editors explained that although the name Periauger had become a tradition, its meaning had grown dim with the passing years. They therefore believed it was important to print the story again, hoping it would remind students not only of the meaning of their yearbook's unusual



name but of the significance of their local heritage.

Five years later, the Class of 1959 took the idea of the boat even further, presenting its yearbook as the voyage of the "Good Ship Periauger." Starting with the cover, a nautical theme was displayed throughout the volume. Drawings of different watercraft filled its pages, and ordinary yearbook sections received jaunty maritime titles. The senior class became the "Navigators." Senior activities and class trips were "Shore Leave," while the underclassmen appeared "Through the Porthole" as members of the "Crew."

Other editions adopted different themes. The 1958 Periauger, for example, presented itself as "our scrapbook of memories"—a collection of what seniors expected to remember through the years: their classes and teachers, parties, sports, activities and, above all, the fun of being together. The concept captures what a yearbook fundamentally is: a student-created time capsule. The cover of the year's annual displayed an eagle, the school's mascot.

These time capsules document changing fashions, customs and attitudes at Dobbs Ferry High School. Hemlines rise and fall; hairstyles grow longer; and increasingly relaxed dress codes reflect social changes. Early yearbook photographs show students dressed carefully for picture day. Girls appear in dresses or skirts, sweaters, pearls and circle pins. Boys are formally posed in jackets and ties, and senior portraits could be more formal still, including tuxedos for the young men and traditional portrait drapes for the young women. Later decades gradually abandoned much of that formality.



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Spaghetti Dinner Turns 85!

A beloved Dobbs Ferry tradition is celebrating a milestone this year as Our Lady of Pompeii Church's annual Spaghetti Dinner marks its 85th year.

For generations, residents from Dobbs Ferry and beyond have made their way to the lower level of the church on Palisade Street for a hearty plate of the evening's specialty—spaghetti and meatballs, with salad, and dessert of course! More than simply a meal, the dinner has become a community gathering place stretching back more than eight decades.

The dinner is the church's largest fund raiser. During the long pastorate of Father Anthony Ciriaco, who served Our Lady of Pompeii from 1957 until his death in 1987, the dinner found its permanent place on the village calendar. Father Anthony decided it should be held on the last



Preparing the meatballs and Sunday sauce for the Spaghetti Dinner

weekend of October, a tradition that has continued ever since.

There has been only one interruption. In 2020, the dinner was cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following year, the dinner returned receiving an enthusiastic welcome from the community.

Over the years, the event has also developed another Dobbs Ferry tradition: political

candidates, regardless of party affiliation, have made the dinner a must-stop on the campaign trail. In election years especially, diners might find themselves sharing the room with candidates seeking local, county, state, or other offices.

Through changing times, generations of parishioners and countless volunteers have kept the tradition alive, making the Spaghetti Dinner something special.



Ernest Howell



Olena Nabatov

In Memoriam

We Remember With Gratitude And
Love Two Extraordinary Friends

**ERNEST (ERNIE) HOWELL
And
OLENA NABATOV**

Whose Enthusiasm And Efforts
On Our Behalf Were So Deeply
Appreciated And Whose Presence
We Shall Dearly Miss

The DOBBS FERRY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Periauger...

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The curriculum changed as well. The pages recall courses once considered standard parts of secondary education but now altered or gone, including home economics, business subjects and typing. Clubs appear, flourish and sometimes vanish entirely. Early volumes include pictures of the Board of Education, while various later editions recognize custodians and even the women who worked in the school lunchroom.

Yet certain elements remain remarkably constant. The school building appears again and again. The senior class is always front and center, accompanied by individual write-ups. Sports, activities, faculty members and student organizations always fill the pages. Student artwork enhance section openings and margins, reminding us that these books were not merely records produced for students—they were created by students. Editors, photographers, artists, writers and other staff members all contributed to assembling each year's portrait of school life.

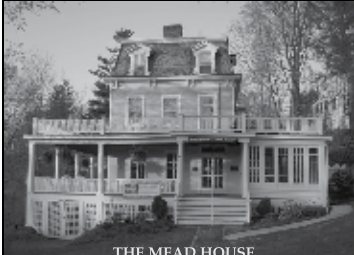
By 1969, the Periauger reflected the turbulent world beyond the school walls. A striking two-page spread recorded the suffering and mass starvation associated with the Biafra War. Disturbing photographs of starving Biafran children brought an international humanitarian crisis directly into the yearbook.

Other traditions gradually faded. The school alma mater, once regularly printed in the annual, appeared less consistently as the years passed. The appearance and organization of the books changed with contemporary graphic design and student tastes. Over time, yearbook themes would disappear allowing the contents to tell its own story.

One tradition, however, survived: the name. Yearbooks are far more than a collection of photographs. Page by page, the volumes document social attitudes while recording the ordinary pleasures of school life.

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Janice Candela, visual storyteller

Artist and illustrator Janice Candela was born in Athens, Pennsylvania, in 1923. She graduated from Syracuse University in 1944 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, specializing in illustration, and continued her artistic training at the Art Students League of New York and Pratt Institute.

Candela began her career as a commercial

artist in New York City. After marrying Joseph Candela in 1947, they moved to Dobbs Ferry in 1951 and raised four children. She joined American Portrait Artists of New York and remained associated with the organization until 1977. A versatile artist, Candela worked in oils, painted restaurant murals and "popscares," produced illustrations, and accepted private portrait commissions.

While living in Westchester, Candela was active in the local arts community, participating in the Westchester Art Society and other area art associations. Her work was exhibited in galleries and public buildings throughout the region.



Candela 1970s (Photo: Art in the Family)

Following the death of her husband in 1968, Candela married Norman Tate in 1971. She later moved to Port Clyde, Maine, where she remained involved in the arts and continued to create and exhibit her work. Candela died in 1995.



Popscape - The Critic (Photo: Art in the Family)



Paper dolls by Candela (Photo: Art in the Family)

Art Exhibit and Sale

To Benefit the Dobbs Ferry
Historical Society

**Saturday August 22nd and
Sunday, August 23rd**

Time: 10am-5pm

**The Mead House
12 Elm Street, Dobbs Ferry, NY**

Visit the Mead House and its
grounds while enjoying the art
exhibit and sale.

