

# The Evergreens Cemetery Quarterly Newsletter

## Chinese Heritage at the Evergreens Cemetery

The Evergreens Cemetery has a long history of being inclusive, and New Yorkers of many nationalities and ethnicities are interred in the cemetery. The cemetery, founded in 1849, has a rich history with strong ties to the Chinese community that date back to the founding of the cemetery and form a legacy that continues to this day.

The Evergreens was the first cemetery in the New York City area to bury Chinese people, and many people of Chinese heritage continue to be buried here. Many identifiable ethnic sections are scattered throughout the cemetery's 225 acres. The largest and most visible of these sections are the areas with many Chinese burials, such as Celestial Hill #1 and #2, Beacon Hill #3, Peniel, Kwong Fai Toi, Wing Lok, Gibron, and Mount of Olives.

The first Chinese immigrants were merchant seamen, and the first Chinese individual buried in New York is believed to be a sailor, known as John Shu, who was interred at the Evergreens in the Seaman's Grounds in 1853. This was the first group plot at the Evergreens, and contained indigent merchant sailors of all nationalities and races. Many more Chinese burials followed, reflecting immigration patterns of the Chinese into the United States beginning in the 1850s. In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act barred immigration by almost all Chinese. The act, originally intended to last 10 years, was renewed in 1892 with the Geary Act and made permanent in 1902. It was not repealed until 1943, in recognition of China's role as an ally in World War II.

Among widespread racial prejudice in the 19th century, the Evergreens was a beacon of tolerance in its willingness to bury members of the Chinese community. The cemetery was committed to respecting and honoring the deceased -- regardless of race, creed or religion -- at a time when many other cemeteries were refusing to inter Chinese people.

In 1877 a large area on Hickory Knoll was sold to a Chinese benevolent organization, which buried 32 people there. There was a public outcry, but the Evergreens stood by its inclusive policy. In 1883 the local Chinese consul, Au Yang Ming, and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association approached the Evergreens about establishing a Chinese cemetery within the Evergreens. The group burial site, laid out according to the principals of Feng Shui, was named Celestial Hill, and contained approximately 200 interments by 1891. Subsequently a number of other Chinese areas were laid out, several with a spirit gate over the entrance.

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### Cemetery Hours

Grounds are open seven days a week from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm.

The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Please contact the office about holiday closures.

## *Letter from the President*

With the advent of spring, flowering trees beckon across the rolling hills, promising renewal. In preparation for the growing season, we have been hard at work on the beautification of our historic landscape. We have completed the graceful garden plantings at our expanded Garden Mausoleum and we have paid special attention to our marvelous and vast collection of historic trees. We hope you will enjoy the results when you visit.

With our newly initiated formal Tree Management program, we have commissioned a professional tree inventory and learned more about the thousands of trees, representing more than a hundred species, on our grounds. With the advice of professional arborists, we completed the pruning of five hundred trees and removed some dead trees that had finally succumbed to the enduring stress of Hurricane Sandy. In addition, we are working to protect our healthy hundred-year-old oak trees from the threat of the devastating oak wilt disease appearing elsewhere in the region.

We are particularly delighted to be fully engaged with our Cultural Landscape Report, which is funded by the New York State Office of Historic Preservation, assessing the damage of Hurricane Sandy. The Cultural Landscape Report will highlight our historic rural cemetery, associated with Andrew Jackson Downing. The report will provide a blueprint for preserving and maintaining our nationally significant landscape, which dates from 1849.

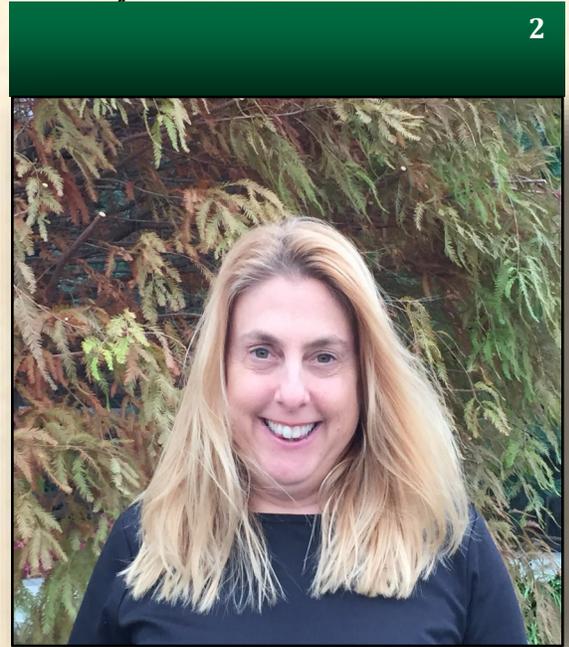
We have developed a slate of programming for the coming months designed to allow visitors to enjoy the 225 acres of beautiful open space and to commemorate the rich history of the people buried here. Some of the notable spring programming will be:

- A stargazing event with the Amateur Astronomers Association of New York on Friday, May 5th
- An Arbor Day tree walk with esteemed arborist, author and founder of Urban Arborists Bill Logan on Sunday, May 7th
- A tap dance performance on Saturday, May 20th to celebrate National Tap Dance Day (which is on May 25th) and commemorate tap legend Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, who is interred at the Evergreens

Our mission is to serve our families and communities and fulfill the highest standards of excellence in continuing to make this a beautiful and contemplative space. The advent of spring is a time of renewal at the Evergreens, and we look forward to welcoming you.

With best wishes,

*Julie Bose*



## A Sassafras Grows in Brooklyn

By Helen Thurston

The Evergreens Cemetery is the proud home of an unusually large sassafras tree. A deciduous tree native to North America, the sassafras is typically found in the Northeast as a shrubby young tree under a forest canopy or along the sides of trails and paths.

According to members of New York City Parks Forestry staff who have visited and admired the Evergreens sassafras, a huge standalone tree like this one is uncommon in New York City.

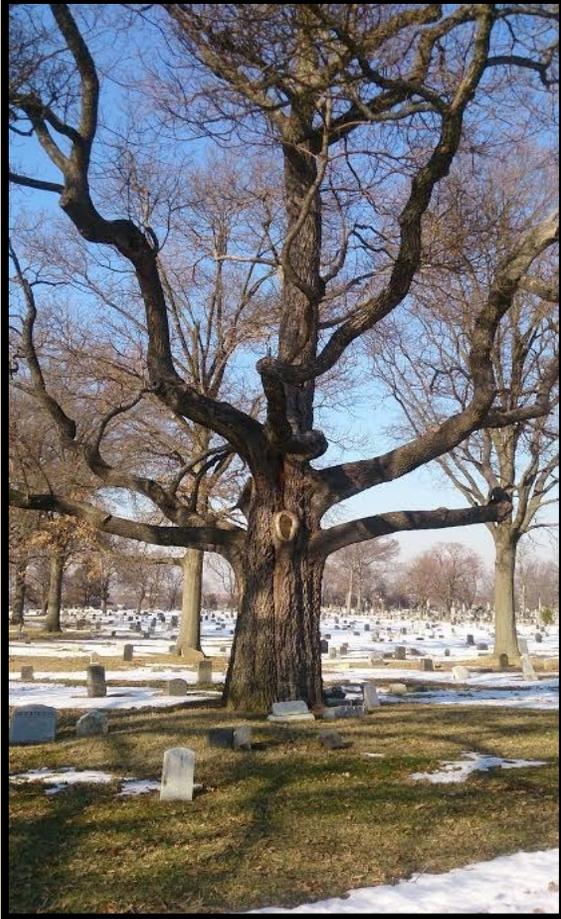
The sassafras is perhaps best known as the tree that originally supplied the “root” in root beer, first commercially produced by Charles Elmer Hines in 1875 and introduced at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876.

But it is not only the root of the sassafras that has gastronomic qualities -- all parts of the sassafras are fragrant, and Native Americans used different parts of the tree for cooking as well as for perceived medicinal properties. Animals and birds also find different parts of the sassafras tree tasty. Saffrole, the active ingredient in the sassafras, was banned by the FDA in 1960 as carcinogenic, and sassafras flavor is now produced artificially.

In addition to its unique fragrance, there are other several particular features of the sassafras tree. The tree can spread via its roots to become a large woody bush-like growth – one of the reasons that standalone trees such as the one at the Evergreens are rare. In addition, the tree has unusual flowering arrangements -- some types of the sassafras have male and female flowers on separate trees, whereas other types of sassafras have male and female flowers on the same tree.

Perhaps the most visually noticeable unusual characteristic of the sassafras is the fact that, unlike other trees, the sassafras has three different kinds of leaves on the same plant: unlobed oval, bilobed (mitten-shaped), and trilobed (three-pronged).

The sassafras at the Evergreens has a spread of about 58 feet and a height of about 50 feet. By point of comparison, the largest known sassafras tree in the world, in Kentucky, measures over 100 feet high and 21 feet in circumference. Arborists at the cemetery care for the tree, and recently removed a large fungus at the base. We invite you to come and admire our majestic sassafras tree, which will be included on our guided tree tour of the Evergreens, led by tree expert and Urban Arborist founder Bill Logan on May 7th.



## Notable Resident

*This article continues our series highlighting important people buried at the Evergreens Cemetery.*

### Dr. Joseph Chak Thoms (1862-1929)

By Scott D. Seligman

The first Western-trained Chinese physician to practice in the U.S. lived most of his life in Brooklyn. A strong advocate for equal rights for Chinese in America, he spoke out forcefully against the injustices to which they were subjected.

China-born Joseph Chak Thoms (1862-1929) arrived in California from China in the mid-1870s, and within a few years had made New York his permanent home. Like all Chinese in America, he was subject to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which halted further immigration of most Chinese and prohibited those already here from becoming American citizens.

Thoms studied with Dr. Nelson Sizer, a Long Island College Hospital professor, and eventually enrolled in the College's medical school – today's SUNY Downstate. In 1890, he became the first ethnic Chinese to graduate from an American medical school. The next year, an eight-bed Chinese Hospital opened at 45 Hicks Street in Brooklyn with Thoms as its head. It was the first clinic in the nation founded for the treatment of Chinese patients with Western methods.

Thoms was also politically active. He was the first president of the Chinese Equal Rights League, which opposed the successor law to the Exclusion Act. At a mass meeting at Cooper Union on September 1, 1892, he declared, "That Chinamen living in peace in the community and respecting the laws of the land should be compelled to be registered like dogs and be subjected to severe penalties without the rights of *habeas corpus* is undemocratic and un-American. We will submit to the laws of your land, but to the yoke of tyranny – never!"

Dr. Thoms perished in the line of duty. He was lured to the bedside of an ex-convict who bore him a personal grudge and was shot to death on May 16, 1929. He was interred at the Evergreens. Although the bones of many Chinese immigrants of his era were eventually shipped back to their native villages in China, Thoms' remains rest in Brooklyn to this day.

*Scott D. Seligman is the author of Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown and other works about early Chinese-Americans.*

Source: *Green Oasis in Brooklyn, The Evergreens Cemetery 1849-2008* by John Rousmaniere

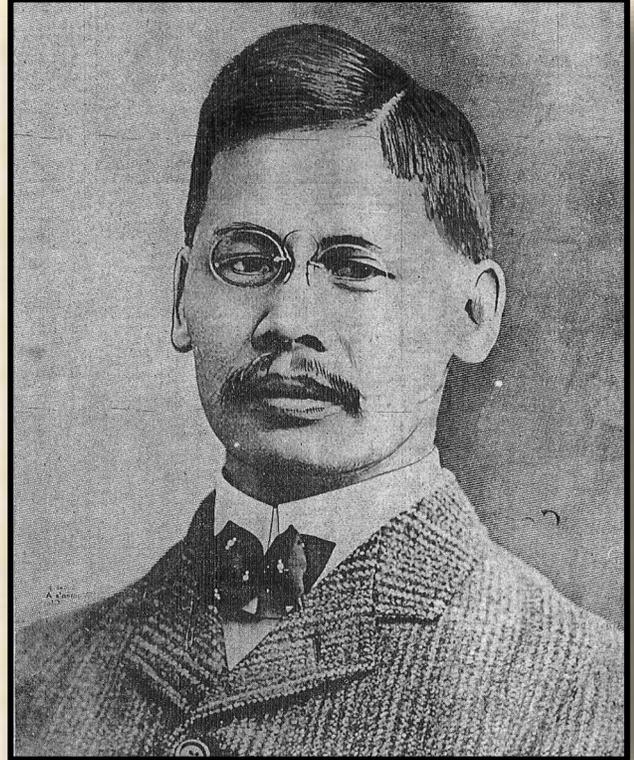


Photo of Dr. Joseph C. Thoms (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 26, 1911)



Grave of Dr. Joseph C. Thoms

**Upcoming Events**

**Stargazing with the Amateur Astronomers Association of New York**

**Friday, May 5  
7:00 to 10:00 p.m.**

Observe the night sky with telescopes and the assistance of members of the Amateur Astronomers Association of New York. Free and open to the public.

RSVPs are appreciated but not required. Register on Eventbrite [HERE](#).

**Guided Tree Tour**

**Sunday, May 7  
11:00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.**

Join us for a guided tree tour led by author, tree expert and Founder of Urban Arborists Bill Logan. Enjoy the spectacular spring foliage as we explore the grounds of the cemetery and learn to identify a variety of tree species. This family-friendly tour will begin at the cemetery office (follow signs from the Bushwick Avenue entrance). Please wear sturdy shoes. Free and open to the public.

RSVPs are required. Register on Eventbrite [HERE](#).



Photo by Steven Sunshine

**Chinese Heritage at the Evergreens Cemetery (Continued)**

Many Chinese people have been buried at the Evergreens in these areas over the years, following traditional funerary customs. Prior to 1937, whenever possible bones were dug up approximately five years after burial and repatriated to China, so the deceased could be reburied in the soil of the motherland. In 1937 the Japan-China War made the shipments of bones impossible, and subsequently Chinese burials have been permanent.

One of the notable Chinese people buried at the Evergreens is Joseph Thoms. Thoms was a China-born prominent physician and social activist, who founded the Chinese hospital in New York City’s Chinatown, the first clinic in the country founded for the purposes of treating Chinese patients with Western medicine.

Other prominent Chinese people buried at the Evergreens include two war heroes. Ou Loo was a seaman in the U.S. Navy during World War I, who died after the ship he served on was sunk by a German submarine. He is buried in the Seaman’s Grounds. Benjamin Ralph Kimlau, the son of one of the first Chinese undertakers in Chinatown, was a World War II pilot whose plane was shot down over New Guinea in March 1944.

The Evergreens Cemetery is proud to provide an inclusive and welcoming resting place for generations of people of Chinese heritage, continuing its commitment to the Chinese community which has been unwavering from the earliest burials in the 19th century to today. Due to its financial health and stability the cemetery offers peace of mind that the graves of loved ones will be well taken care of over the long term.

During festivals such as Ching Ming, or Tomb-Sweeping Day, the cemetery is proud to provide a space for families to come together to remember and honor their ancestors at their graves. Hundreds of visitors come to the cemetery for the yearly rituals of Ching Ming, including praying and



Peniel Section



## Board Member in the Spotlight: *Interview with Frederick Bland, FAIA, AICP*

Frederick Bland is Managing Partner of Beyer Blinder Belle and Architects & Planners LLP. He serves as Chairman of

the Evergreens Cemetery Preservation Foundation Board of Trustees and Chairman of the Buildings and Grounds Committee of The Evergreens Cemetery Board of Trustees.

### *How long have you been involved at the Evergreens Cemetery?*

I am not quite sure but I think it might have been before the year 2000, perhaps. So it's been quite a while.

### *How did you first become involved?*

John Titman, who was the board chair before Jon Weld and, like Jon, a neighbor in Brooklyn Heights, asked me if he could talk to me, and I must say it surprised me that it was about a cemetery. I said, "Let me think about it" because I wasn't sure I ever planned a permanent residency for myself in a cemetery! But I have a weakness for agreeing to involve myself in civic activities, so I was predisposed to do it, I suppose - but I wanted more of a personal hook.

As I thought about it, I realized, as an architect, there were two things that I had learned about cemeteries that had been relevant to me. One was that Frederick Law Olmsted got his brilliant idea to create a park in New York City - Central Park, that is! -- by taking trips from his home on Staten Island on Sunday afternoons to Green-Wood Cemetery in order to join the multitudes of people enjoying the open space of this newly established cemetery. So the Olmsted genius that started the whole park movement in this country started in a cemetery right here in Brooklyn!

Second, I also knew that many famous architects who were as yet unproven at an early point of their careers were given their first opportunity for a commission by an important family by designing the mausoleum in the family plot, not yet being entrusted with the mansion on Fifth Avenue or the "cottage" in Newport. These were often little architectural jewels which led to their designer's later successes and fame.

So, because I saw an opportunity to be involved in the preservation of an important urban open space as well as the preservation of important architectural monuments, I decided to join the board. It also appealed to me that The Evergreens has a small board. I thought that would make it easier to have a voice and to get things done.

*Continued on page 7*

## Upcoming Events

### Tap Dance Performance

**Saturday, May 20  
12:00 to 1:30 p.m.**

Bring a picnic and enjoy a tap dance performance to celebrate National Tap Dance Day (which is on May 25). We will also honor tap legend Bill "Bojangles" Robinson with a wreath-laying ceremony at his grave. Free and open to the public. RSVPs are appreciated but not required. Register on Eventbrite [HERE](#)

### Walking Tours

Join Donato "Danny" Daddario for a historic tour of the cemetery. Tours will take place on the following dates at 11:00 a.m. and are approximately two hours in length:

**Sunday, April 30**  
**Sunday, May 28\***  
**Sunday, June 11**  
**Sunday, June 25**

*\*This Memorial Day tour will have a military theme*

RSVPs are required; register by phone or email. Tours will begin at the cemetery gates at 1629 Bushwick Avenue.

## Board Member in the Spotlight: Frederick Bland (Continued)

*You're the chairman of the board of the Evergreens Cemetery Preservation Foundation. When was it founded and what are its goals?*

As a new foundation (only about 5 years old), we're still finding our way and defining our role. It's oriented to preserving the cemetery and its open space, its trees, and its monuments. But also a goal of ours -- maybe the overriding issue that motivates me now to continue to be on this board for so long -- is my thought that

cemeteries in all urban areas, certainly in New York but also around the country, are beginning to be filled. What are they to become? My view is that urban land in such places as New York is too valuable to simply be "off limits" and should support additional uses -- but uses that are respectful to the permanent souls resting below the surface.

So the Foundation is exploring many different ways by which we can invite neighbors and friends into these beautiful grounds for new purposes: to enjoy the birds (we are in the path of an important flyway)...the impressive specimen trees (we are not an official arboretum but might become one)...the stars at night (we located on a high ridge, away from much city glare)...history (Washington's famous retreat during the Battle of Brooklyn took place through our land)...holiday festivities... and so forth. Perhaps, also, we can interpret some of the extraordinary careers that some of our permanent residents led (tap dancing, beer making...).

*What does the role of chairman of the Buildings and Grounds Committee involve?*

My role officially is to make quarterly visits and tour the grounds with the President and the Superintendent. It's their role to make it all happen but my role is to provide oversight and report back to the board. With the grounds looking so good these days, this has become a quarterly visit I really look forward to. Of course, the weather plays a big role.... Heavy snow and ice, drought, wind... they can all take a toll.

*Could you tell me about your work as an architect?*

I am Managing Partner of the firm Beyer Blinder Belle, a nationally and internationally known architectural and planning firm with a specialty in historic preservation, city and campus planning, institutional complexes and museums, and housing. We've been fortunate to have been entrusted with the care of many of the city's and nation's icons such as Grand Central Terminal, Ellis Island, the United States Capitol, Lincoln Center, Rockefeller Center, the Empire State Building, and on and on. We just finished the Met Breuer to great acclaim and are completing an addition to the State Department complex in Washington DC where we also have an office.

But I'm a design-oriented architect - I'm not really a manager type - so my world is design and I enjoy designing projects -- but I also have led the firm for the past 13 years and that has been extremely rewarding and an honor.

*Where do you live?*

I live in Brooklyn Heights and have since 1972, nearly 45 years!

*What do you like to do in your free time?*

I'm a gardener... a horticulturist... a plant collector (even frequenting rare plant auctions!). It's a complete affiliation - an addiction, really which has overwhelmed my life, but in a wonderful way. So for me, it's all about gardens, and I have two. I have a complex personal garden that I have made over the past 24 years at a weekend place in Connecticut on the shoreline 15 miles east of New Haven. I am growing more than 1600 species of plants in a single acre. I have had a long affiliation with New Haven and Yale, and I love New Haven. Despite all its challenges, it's a wonderful little city, kind of a microcosm of New York in many ways. "My" second garden is the world-renowned Brooklyn Botanic Garden where I have been Chairman of the Board for almost 10 years. What a pleasure and honor that has been!

I also keep myself busy as a Commissioner of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, as a Vestryman of Trinity Church Wall Street, and as Chair of the Fitch Foundation, a national preservation foundation. I am also a member of the Mark Morris Dance Group board of trustees.



## Easter Eggstravaganza

Our first annual Easter Eggstravaganza was a great success! On Saturday, April 15th we welcomed many children and their families -- over 500 people in all -- to enjoy an egg hunt, visit with the Easter Bunny, and a petting zoo. Everyone had a wonderful time and we look forward to next year!



**The Evergreens Cemetery Board of Trustees**

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**The Evergreens Cemetery Preservation Foundation's Annual Appeal Update: Thank You!**

We have successfully concluded the second year of the Evergreens Cemetery Preservation Foundation's annual appeal and would like to say thank you to all who have contributed.

"We are happy to see people donating to the preservation of our historic cemetery," noted the Evergreens Cemetery President Julie Bose, who also serves as President of the Foundation. "We are grateful to all the donors who help us make sure that the history and beauty of our grounds are enjoyed appropriately as we continue our tradition of service to our families, their loved ones and our community." Donations may be made by credit card by clicking on the attached [link](#), or mailing a check to The Evergreens Cemetery Preservation Foundation, 1629 Bushwick Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11207.

**Making Arrangements**

The Evergreens Cemetery provides a beautiful final resting place for loved ones, and we are pleased to discuss the variety of options available.

**Contact:**

Anthony Salamone

Family Service Counselor

718-455-5300

[info@theevergreenscemetery.com](mailto:info@theevergreenscemetery.com)

