

Remembrance of Things To Come

By Jerry Cammarata

If you had strolled down any Richmond County street a century ago and inquired of any Staten Islander what one person of that time would be remembered down through succeeding generations, the most likely response you would have received would have been Erastus Wiman. After all, he was the man who was president of the infant Staten Island Telephone Exchange Company, who had created the Island's transportation hub at a ferry terminal he built in a place he named St. George (after one of his friends), who had extended the Island's railroad to his own impressive residential development which he named "Erastina" (after himself), who had created the South Beach resort community (a sort of little Atlantic City of its time) by laying mass transit links to the area, who managed several ferries and had built the Island's railroad bridge to New Jersey, who had built a three story entertainment complex that could have served as the inspiration for Madison Square Garden, who had hired the Metropolitan Baseball Club (the team that later became the New York Giants) and made his Island baseball field their home, who was even on the board of directors of brand new Edison Illuminating Company.

Ask any Islander *today* who Erastus Wiman was, and you are likely to get a blank stare.

William T. Davis, the quintessential Staten Island Boy, was a younger contemporary of Wiman. He grew up rambling through the fields and marshes of what

was then still rural Richmond County. Few Island school children have *not* heard of Davis, whether as the naturalist after whom the William T. Davis Wildlife Refuge in Travis was named, or as the “bug man” who became the leading authority on cicadas, or as the author of *Staten Island and Its People* (the most quoted history of the Island). A public school is named for him, and his legacy to the Island can be seen in both the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences (which he founded at the age of 19), and the Staten Island Historical Society (he was president when he was 70), which are educating youngsters even today in ways of which Davis could hardly have dreamed.

Both men had lasting effects on the daily lives of Islanders, both were prominent citizens, both were well known in their day, yet Davis’ fame has persisted, whereas Wiman is recalled only in the names of a few streets on the Island, and even the people who live on these roads probably don’t know of the Barnum-like character who lent them his moniker.

Why the difference?

One explanation might be that Wiman chose to devote himself simply to the pursuit of business, while Davis associated himself with education.

Larry Ellison, the chief executive officer of Oracle Corporation, the business computer communications super-giant, recently came to New York to accept an honorary degree. He used the opportunity to challenge successful businessmen to seek new opportunities for investment, opportunities that would not lead to larger returns for themselves, but to the enrichment of future generations, opportunities far more likely to gain them immortality than the amassing of cyber-gold.

He pointed out that of all the railroad magnates of the last century, when the railroad business was to the country what the Internet business is today, the only name most Americans are likely to recognize is that of Leland Stanford, because he used his fortune to found Stanford University in California. As an Islander, I might add that a few might also remember Cornelius Vanderbilt, another Island boy who made his first million on the Staten Island Ferry, before making his second in railroads, and left much of both fortunes to create Vanderbilt University in Tennessee.

Fortunes are being made today in the boom years of the beginning of the Information Economy, even as they were being made years ago when America joined the Industrial revolution. Most who grew wealthy back then avariciously pushed their money back into their industries to expand their powerbase in the attempt to grow even wealthier. Many saw those fortunes evaporate over the years through high living or risky ventures. A wise few, though, gave of their treasure to build lasting legacies, ones that could not be squandered by descendants or lost in a day in the stock market. They gave to create educational institutions that have endured and brought forth inestimable dividends of good.

Today we remember Andrew Carnegie not as the great steelmaker, but as the man who built thousands of hometown libraries (including libraries on Staten Island) and put books into the hands of children. We remember Carnegie's right hand man, Henry Clay Frick, as the philanthropist who gave his magnificent art collection to the people of this city, not as an officer of a manufacturing company.

These examples represent a local time and place, and it has been configured to showcase both our community and the stake we must have in its survival. However, I cannot deny the bigger picture of this thought and give Larry Ellison the credit for such an inspiring concept. Mr. Ellison sees you and me as individuals who must be on a journey toward social and educational reform. He sees the hope of tomorrow entrenched in the deeds of today. He sees the positive influence of adults on kids as the only way to insure a thriving, eclectic community of people.

Who will be the Larry Ellison of Staten Island in the future? Who will be our next Carnegie?

Who is tomorrow's William T. Davis?

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