

## **This exhibition will highlight the work of two prominent photographers of Queens, Percy Loomis Sperr (1840 – 1964) and Frederic J. Weber (1881 – 1967).**

Known as the “Official Photographer for the City of New York,” Percy Loomis Sperr was born in 1890 in Columbus, Ohio. In the early 1920s, Loomis moved to New York where he resided in Staten Island for the next forty years until his death in 1964. Starting in 1923, Loomis came under contract from the New York Public Library who hired him to photograph the five boroughs of New York City and to chronicle the changing architectural landscape of the city. From the early 1920s until early the 1940s, Sperr’s on the street photography produced more than 40,000 photographs of the five boroughs of New York with the main focus on his home borough Staten Island. The exhibition will display a group of photographs depicting Queens’ colonial homestead and Victorian mansions, farm and marsh landscape, and urban settings. His work has become a living record of what Queens County looked like before it was transformed into how we know and experience it today. The images are startling and breathtaking. Though there is a documentary perspective, the photographs will be analyzed through their atmospheric, and expressive qualities as well as their emphasis on pictorial composition and sensitivity of light and shadow. This will be the first time that they will be presented through an artistic lens with the hope of bringing Sperr into consideration within the field of fine art.

Frederick Johann Weber was born March 4, 1881, in Austria. He started taking photos at nine and became professional at 15. He immigrated to The Rockaways in 1899 and for the next 50 years worked as a professional photographer capturing nearly 10,000 images of Queens and Long Island.

Weber’s photography became his full-time career in 1901. He opened his own photography studio with his business partner Peter Nybo along Jamaica Avenue around 1909. He was the official photographer for the Long Island Rail Road’s legal department and for the Queens Chamber of Commerce in its early years around the time of World War I. Weber used an 8 by 10 Bellows camera for large canvases and a banquet camera for panoramic shots. Weber sold his camera to the International Center of Photography and retired in 1959. He sold most of his photographs in 1966 to the Queens Public Library and the American railroad historian Ron Ziel (1939 – 2016) who lived in Queens during the ’40s. Weber’s photographs are similar to Sperr’s in that they capture everyday life on the streets in Queens albeit with slight differences. Sperr took photos which had an immediate journalistic like approach where Weber captured moments that tended to be carefully staged capturing a mise en scene of movement which included people and vehicles going about their daily journeys.



Percy Loomis Sperr photographs are of courtesy of the Jason Antos Collection  
Frederic J. Weber photographs are of courtesy of the Queens Public Library Archive  
Co-curated by Daniela Addamo and Jason Antos

# Street Views & Daily Life

The lens of Sperr and Weber captured Queens in different periods of transition. Weber photographed amazing scenes of humanity in the late 1800s and early 1900s; persons and trolleys going through the daily grind and beautiful portraits of civil servants including local police and fire departments. An innocent view of Queens indeed. Sperr's street scenes depict a borough in transition from rural to suburban in a time which saw the greatest development of infrastructure during the mid 1920s through the late 1930s. Some of Sperr's images capture grand estates and old byways in their final days before being removed from the landscape forever. The images depict amazing views of local streets before their widening in the late 1930s. Many of the homes and businesses were torn down in order for these enhancements to be implemented. In many cases, areas which are today densely populated suburbs were nothing more than dirt lots, grassy plains and swampy terrain. There are sights of businesses and real estate billboards especially for Halleran's real estate agency with its familiar, "So This Is Flushing!" slogan. Weber's images of daily life are beautifully orchestrated ranging from dramatic to glossy portraits of buildings, people and action. Sperr offers a kind of 'you are there' style of photography with images taken at eye level giving the viewer a glimpse of what one would encounter as they walked along the road taking in the sights.

# Transportation

For most of its history, Queens has always been a major hub for transportation. The movement of people from place to place has played a major factor in its development. Beginning in the early 1850s, the first stagecoaches appeared. Funded by local business owners, these horse drawn vehicles connected the rural villages and even brought Queens closer to Manhattan and Brooklyn. By the late 1860s, the Long Island Rail Road brought people from midtown Manhattan to the far reaches of Queens and further east to Long Island. The Queens County Railway Co. began crisscrossing the neighborhoods of Queens in the 1870s and lastly, the Interboro Rapid Transit dual system brought the masses from the city to developing suburbs during the era of World War I. Weber's speciality was the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) which employed him as a photographer for their legal department. Trolleys traveling along Jamaica Avenue, the headquarters of Weber's studios, were also a favorite of his. Sperr also took images of the LIRR and trolleys as well but the lenses of his camera fell upon the newest modes of transportation of the day as well; the automobile and aviation. The car makes numerous appearances in his images of Flushing as the former farming village exploded into a huge suburban center in the late 1930s early 1940s. Aviation was also a favorite topic. As Sperr walked along the thoroughfares of Queens he came upon the beginnings of North Beach Airport (the future LaGuardia Airport) and even little known oddities such as Holmes Airport that featured the hangar of the GoodYear blimp which called the rural outskirts of Jackson Heights home in the 1930s. Also shown are the industrial aspects of transportation including trolley barns, rail yards and coal storages.

# People

There are many photographs showing street scenes and structures in Queens. They number in the thousands. However, there are very few images which spotlight the people. Images of people are a rare gem indeed as one culls through the archives of historic Queens. Sperr and Weber filled this void with poignant photographs of the people of the borough, Weber's approach showed people in portrait views and staged group shots where Sperr was more journalistic and in the moment. Regardless of their different approaches, Sperr and Weber captured people of all social classes. Thanks to Weber, we have a record of civil servants, members of the middle class and panoramic images of organizations celebrating at dinners for their respective clubs taken with a banquet camera. Weber's people are dressed in beautiful attire of the period where the people depicted by his counterpart are a bit rougher. Sperr preserves for us, the people of the working class. A German farmer posing at his well on his property along Utopia Parkway and 73<sup>rd</sup> Avenue; families enjoying a picnic at pleasure grounds at North Beach and the Grand Central Parkway; and, in a rare image, the children of 'Black Dublin' a forgotten neighborhood situated on old Amity Street (today's Roosevelt Avenue) between Main Street and College Point Boulevard then known as Lawrence Street. This area was heavily populated by Black and Irish residents hence its name and acted as a large portion of the congregation of the AME Macedonia Church.

# Old Homesteads and Businesses

When Sperr and Weber deployed their talents on the streets of Queens, they photographed many old homesteads and businesses. Their approaches were very different indeed. Weber brought to life the look of commerce at work including large office buildings along the Jamaica Avenue corridor and newly constructed edifices like banks and firehouses as Queens experienced its first wave of modern development after the opening of the Queensborough Bridge in 1909. Weber also captured the fading elegance of colonial era establishments including the Pettit Tavern and Hotel, a local watering hole of the Jamaica community and a hangout for British soldiers during the War of Independence. Sperr's journey throughout the borough took on a different approach. His images show us the ancient homesteads of northern Queens. Lonely unpaved dirt and rock covered roads winding their way to homes made of stone or wood with each one no higher than two floors. Most of the homes and businesses photographed by Weber show a borough in the state of renewal where Sperr's show photographic evidence of how parts of Queens, even into the late 1920s, remained in a medieval state. Some homesteads were abandoned and some were occupied. Those who dwelled within did so without modern conveniences. Some were without electricity or indoor plumbing. The homesteaders, the remaining family members of Queens County's founding families who lived upon this firmament for three hundred years, lived in these houses with pride as Sperr's images reveal. Proud of their family heritage and for the fact that they were the keepers of the family flame whose legacy in the borough was on the eve of its grand exit soon to be replaced by airport, parkways and lastly, their numerous amounts acreage, pristine for centuries, were soon covered over by planned communities.