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Searching for George Wilson’s Garage

Keywords: *F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, found, Wilson’s garage*

The second chapter of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* opens with Nick Carraway describing the desolation of the valley of ashes and the misery of George Wilson’s garage lying on the edge of that hellish place. With the help of the 1927 Belcher-Hyde Queens County Atlas (see Figure 1) and the 1924 aerial map of New York City (see Figure 2), one can locate Wilson’s garage with a fair degree of accuracy.

Fitzgerald lived in Great Neck between October 1922 and April 1924 and began writing *Gatsby* while there. This section of Long Island, known as the “Gold Coast,” became its setting. Fitzgerald drew heavily on the reality he knew, and there are some readily identifiable landmarks in Nick’s descriptions.

The “motor road” Nick references is Northern Boulevard. At the time this ancient road, also known as Jackson Avenue and Bridge Street, was the main vehicular artery into New York City from Great Neck and Manhasset—“The Eggs.” The “valley of ashes” was the vast Corona ash dump bounded on the north by Northern Boulevard, the east by Flushing Creek, the south by Queens Boulevard, and the west by the streets of Corona. It ceased operation in 1932 and was leveled off to become the site of the 1939 World’s Fair. The “small foul river” is Flushing Creek, choked with ugly barge traffic. The “drawbridge” is the picturesque, two-turreted Northern Boulevard bridge that passed over the creek (see Figure 3). It too was sacrificed in the wake of the creation the Grand Central Parkway, built to accommodate the fair.

Most who search for Wilson’s garage believe the train Nick and Tom took into the city that Sunday in July 1922 was the Port Washington line of the Long Island Railroad. The Port Washington line came out of the city

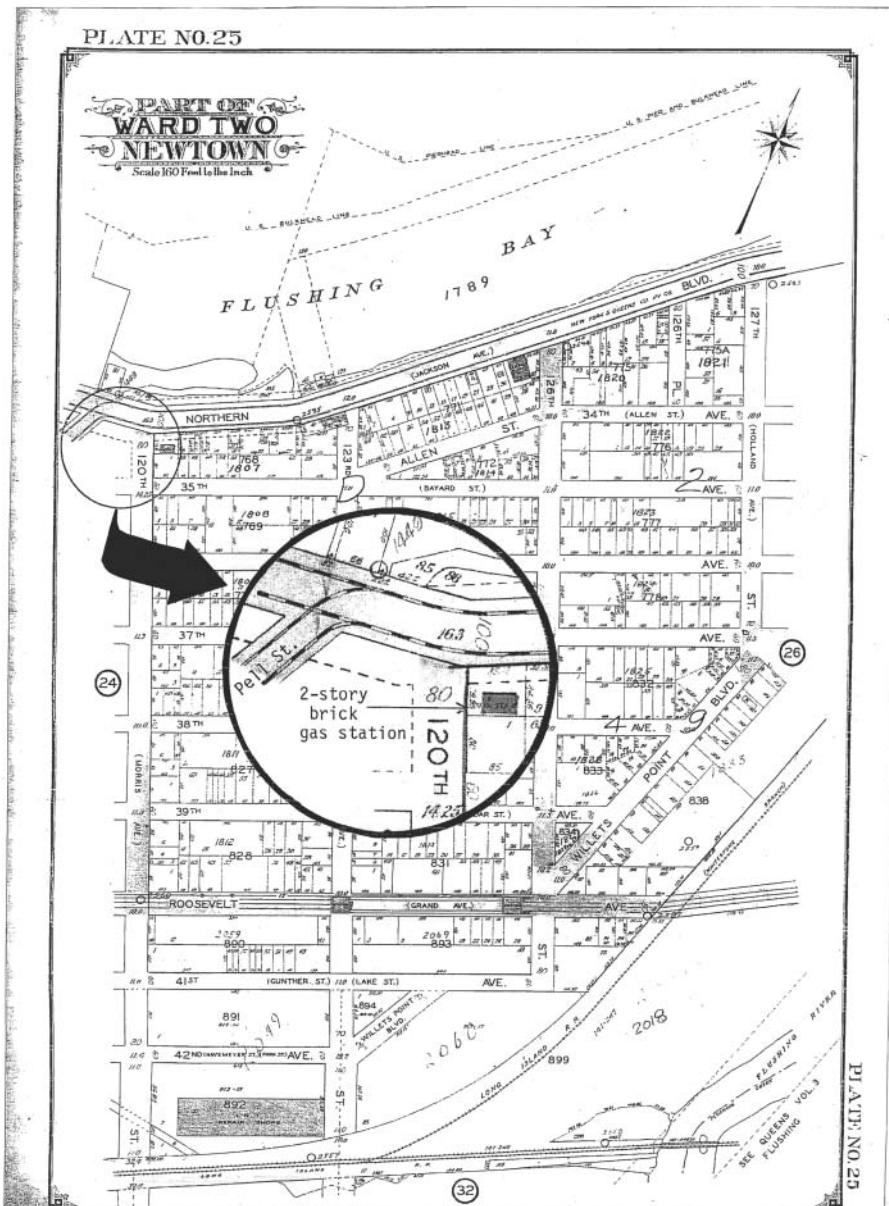
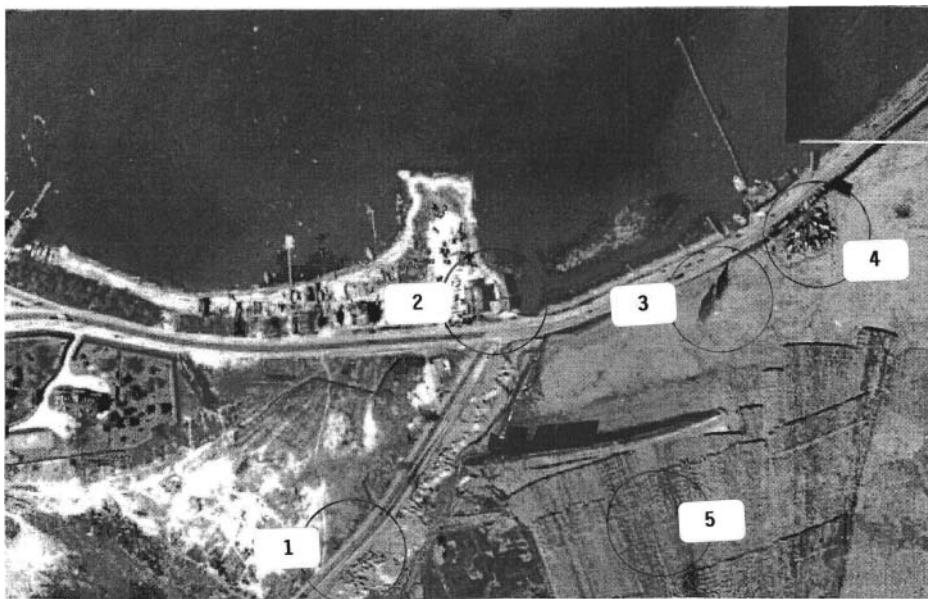


FIGURE 1. Belcher-Hyde: Queens Vol. 2, 1927.

and followed 44th Avenue through Corona, knifing across the ash dump on a straight line to Flushing Creek. It crossed the creek on its own drawbridge about a half mile south of the Northern Boulevard drawbridge, proceeding to Main Street in Flushing and then to Douglaston, Little Neck, Great Neck, and



1. Pell Street
2. Trio of brick buildings
3. Billboards
4. Wilson's Garage
5. Ash dump

FIGURE 2. 1924 aerial map of New York City.

Manhasset, finishing its route in Port Washington; however, this drawbridge carried no motor traffic. There was no road of any kind near it, and its tracks did not "join" with Northern Boulevard as Nick describes it. Tom could never have gotten off the Port Washington line to meet Wilson's wife, Myrtle. It was nowhere near Northern Boulevard. Nick and Tom were not on the Long Island railroad at all.

They were headed into New York City aboard the Northern Boulevard trolley operated by the New York and Queens County Railway Company. The "New York and Queens," as it was known, operated two lines in this vicinity. As described by Meyers and Seyfried in their histories of the trolleys in Queens, the first line was the popular Northern Boulevard route beginning at the underground 59th Street Terminal at 2nd Avenue in Manhattan, a handsome tiled "lower level" terminal designed to accommodate the several trolley lines using the Queensboro Bridge.¹ After crossing the Bridge, the line wound its way through Queens Plaza and followed Northern Boulevard along the bleak northern edge of the ash dump. It crossed Flushing Creek

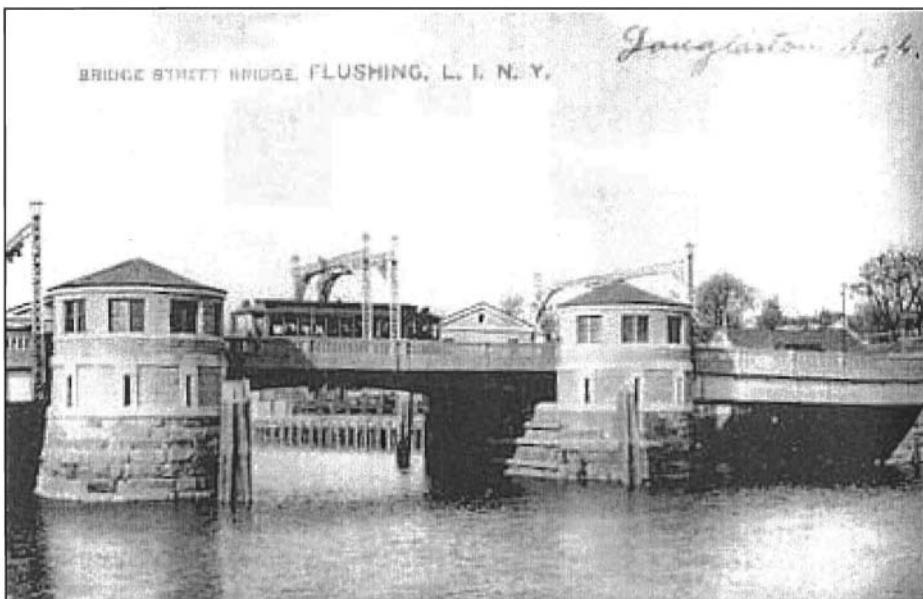


FIGURE 3. Trolley crossing the Northern Boulevard–Flushing Creek Drawbridge, c. 1925.

using the Northern Boulevard drawbridge and headed to Main Street in the heart of Flushing.

The second line was the less popular Corona line. It too began at the 59th Street terminal. After crossing the Queensboro Bridge, it ran through Woodside and Corona on a convoluted route to the western edge of the ash dump. The line crossed the dump diagonally heading toward Northern Boulevard using a roughly graded right-of-way named Pell Street. It joined Northern Boulevard about three-quarters of a mile west of the drawbridge. In 1922, this right-of-way was not improved for motor traffic. Without a developed street to ride on the dual raised trolley, tracks coming out of Pell Street were virtually identical to any train tracks. Here—after crossing the drawbridge—a trolley heading west along Northern Boulevard into the city would probably slow and stop for a moment, allowing the operator to make sure the switches were correctly set and the intersection was clear of conflicting traffic. This may well be “the minute” that permitted Tom to drag Nick off the train to meet Myrtle, his lover, at the garage. Lying on the north edge of the ash dump this intersection was a desolate place. The Belcher-Hyde Atlas and the City aerial map reveal the possible location of Wilson’s garage near this place of emptiness and profound sadness.

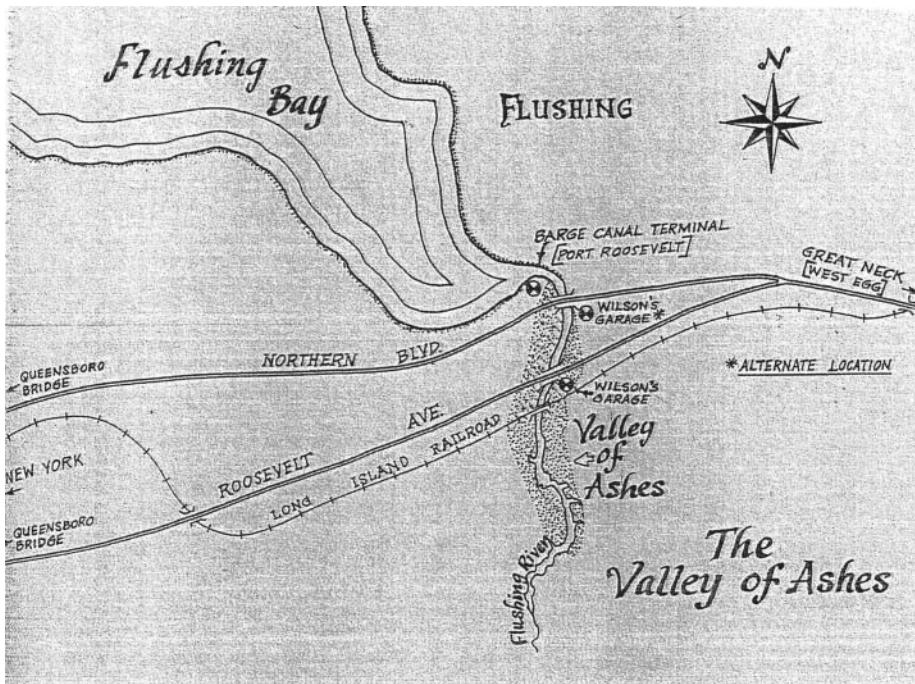


FIGURE 4. Wilson's garage, as located in *F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby: A Literary Reference* (Brucoli 39).

A cluster of three attached brick buildings appears here on the north side of Northern Boulevard, very possibly Fitzgerald's "main street" ministering to the valley of ashes. Further east, about three hundred feet along Northern Boulevard, appears a two-story brick building on the south side of Northern Boulevard labeled "gas station."² It is likely that this gas station served as Fitzgerald's model for Wilson's garage.³

Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Brucoli misplaces Wilson's garage and the ash dump on his map of the area (see Figure 4). Brucoli has the dump running in linear fashion along both sides of Flushing Creek, but the dump never extended across the Creek. Brucoli places Wilson's garage on the Flushing side of the Port Washington line bridge, but there was no road there at all.⁴

There are flaws here. All three protagonists—Tom, Nick, and Myrtle—later travel together into the city on the same "train" with Myrtle riding in "another car" to respect the sensibilities of any other East Eggers "who might be on the train." Of course, trolley cars do not travel in tandem like a conventional train.⁵ Also, I find no contemporary photograph

of anything similar to the “low whitewashed railroad fence” Nick and Tom climbed over to reach the garage. I cannot account for Fitzgerald’s report that Wilson’s garage was part of a three-building complex on Northern Boulevard containing the garage, the all-night restaurant, and the unoccupied unit. As I see it, the model for Wilson’s garage was a stand-alone structure about seven hundred feet east of this trio of buildings. These minor discrepancies may be just a matter of poetic license.

Notes

¹This structure still exists but is sealed off.

²Fitzgerald later describes Wilson’s garage as a gasoline filling station as well as a used car garage. The three hundred feet matches exactly the “100 yards” Tom and Nick “walked back” along Northern Boulevard to the garage.

³A garage-type structure with several cars around it appears on the 1924 aerial map also on the south side of Northern Boulevard but at a distance of about seven hundred feet easterly from the Pell Street-Northern Boulevard intersection. It also shows two large billboards close by. Was one the Dr. T. J. Eckleburg billboard?

⁴Bruccoli was closer to the truth when he selected an alternative site for the garage on the Flushing side of the Northern Boulevard drawbridge—but far removed from the ash dump.

⁵Trolley cars are self-propelled single units, yet it is possible that two or more would travel in close proximity to accommodate the numbers of riders.

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