

1- The Origins of the Long Island Civil Rights Movement

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Social studies curricula generally portray the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's as a struggle to end racial segregation in the southern part of the United States, especially the deep southern states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. However, an important part of the civil rights struggle was fought in the north, including in several Long Island communities where terrorism and discrimination were used to maintain racial segregation. Many of the problems that confront Long Island today are a result of the inability of Nassau and Suffolk counties to resolve issues related to racism and social justice over twenty-five years ago.

Historians tend to identify organizations like the Ku Klux Klan with the south, but clandestine racist groups existed on Long Island from the 1920's through the 1960's. In the decade after World War I, Long Island was a major site of a resurgent Klan that tried to intimidate recent Catholic and Jewish immigrants to the United States. Some local historians estimate that in the mid-1920's, over 20,000 Long Island residents were Klan members, including the Freeport chief of police and three Suffolk County Republican Party chairmen. In 1922, the Klan burned a cross in a Catholic and Jewish neighborhood of Freeport and in 1924, 6,000 Klansmen marched through the town. In 1928, an estimated 8,000 people were at a cross-burning in Wantagh.¹

Paul W. F. Linder, a real estate developer from Malverne who was President of the Homeland Corporation, was also the Great Titan of the New York State Klan. Because of his role in the development of Malverne, a street and an elementary school were named after him. In July 1926, a Klan fair called a Klorero was held in Mineola and it was attended by thousands of Long Island residents. A fund-raising journal published in conjunction with the festivities recorded donations from hundreds of Long Island businesses, organizations, and individuals, including the Women's Welfare League of Suffolk County, The Bellmore Press, The Northport Observer, The Hempstead Sentinel, the Oceanside National Bank, the Lindenhurst Police Department, and the First Reformed Church of West Sayville.²

Even though the Klan fell into eclipse in the 1930's, racial intimidation continued, and it was increasingly aimed at Long Island's Black population. In towns like Amityville, Central Islip, East Meadow, and Setauket, groups tried to intimidate African American residents by defacing property with hate symbols and through cross burnings.³ African American groups countered these attacks by intensifying their campaigns against racism and by demanding increased police protection.⁴

Frequently during the 1960's, Black residents of Long Island felt that police officers were more inclined to harass than to protect them. In January 1966, Newsday reported charges by CORE that alleged police brutality in the arrest of a man from Hempstead. On July 29, 1966, The New York Times documented an incident in North Amityville where Suffolk police blocked the main roads leading into this predominantly African American community after a series of incidents following an outdoor rally whose aim was to improve community-police relations. At the rally and in the article, African Americans accused police officers of regularly using abusive language, including the term "nigger."⁵ Actions by white officials often frustrated young Blacks and incited rioting. In an unusually violent episode in 1966, Black youths in the Carleton Park section of Central Islip responded to what they considered police harassment of an African American man by assaulting the two police officers.⁶

Much of the racial conflict on Long Island had economic roots. Real-estate brokers exacerbated racism for their own economic gain. Brokers profited from the fears of white people. According to the New York Times, in the early 1960's they began "a strong campaign of 'block-busting' or inducing scare selling" in Port Jefferson, Freeport and East Meadow.⁷

In many towns, white residents opposed racially integrating schools or allowing Black teachers to teach their children. In 1957, the N.A.A.C.P. charged that many Black education students from New York City public colleges were being discouraged from applying for jobs on Long Island.⁸

Efforts to expose discrimination against African American teacher candidates was part of a larger struggle against job discrimination. Throughout this period, civil rights groups pressured large businesses on Long Island to hire African Americans. According to a Newsday article from January, 1963, "The Long Island effort to combat discrimination in hiring practices is part of a large-scale campaign by C.O.R.E. in the Metropolitan area. The organization is currently organizing a boycott by shoppers against the products produced by Sealtest Foods, a large dairy firm."⁹

Campaigns by the Congress of Racial Equality against job discrimination set off sharp conflict on Long Island and stirred up opposition in the white community. When Lincoln Lynch, the head of the Nassau County chapter of CORE, targeted the Franklin National Bank for its failure to hire employees from minority groups, he was charged with forcing companies to hire employees based on their race. A Newsday editorial accused Lynch of "sowing the seeds of disunity" and provoked an exchange of letters involving Lynch and other community activists. Despite these criticisms, CORE's activism successfully forced companies to end discriminatory hiring practices.¹⁰ Four years later, Lynch and CORE were again in the news as they led the campaign to integrate the all-white Hempstead Volunteer Fire Department.¹¹

While the leading proponents of the civil rights movement on Long Island during the 1960's were CORE and the NAACP, churches, either acting independently or in coalition with these groups, also played a major role in the struggle. Local religious leaders were influential as mediators between civil rights activists and opponents of racial integration, organized groups like the Huntington Township Committee on Human Rights and the Freeport Community Relations Council, appealed to the individual morality of members of their congregations, brought together people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and participated in protests and meetings.¹²

An important figure on Long Island during this period was the Reverend Walter P. Kellenberg, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Rockville Centre. In an article in the Hempstead Beacon, Kellenberg declared, "The principle and most difficult problem

facing our country and each of its citizens today is the struggle for Civil Rights . . . The Declaration of Independence states what is also an incontrovertible fact of Christian teaching, that all men are created equal. . . . But the problem of unequal treatment amongst men is really a moral one. . . . (F)or this reason it is necessary that each individual examine his own conscience in matters of interracial and social justice."¹³

Despite gains during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's, most African American children in the United States continue to attend segregated and unequal schools. "Nationally, . . . (t)hree-fourths of all Black children attend schools that are 90% minority, and this situation is acute in the nation's 26 largest cities."¹⁴ This pattern is replicated in Long Island's public schools, where the failure to create stable, racially integrated communities during the 1960's, has produced a checkerboard pattern of racial segregation and unequal school funding. In Nassau and Suffolk Counties, residents of poorer, predominantly minority communities often pay higher property tax rates, but because of an unequal distribution of commercial establishments and differences in property values, less money is spent on the education of their children. For example, in primarily white, relatively affluent, Hauppauge, residents pay an average of \$2,100 in school taxes on houses assessed at \$60,000, while the district spends \$13,300 to educate each child. However in Brentwood, where 65% of students are either African American or Latino/a, residents pay an average of \$3,000 in school taxes on houses assessed at \$35,000, but the district spends only \$9,700 per child.¹⁵

In his book, Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America, historian Carl Degler described the post-Civil War era in the United States as a "Dawn Without Noon" for African Americans. The end of slavery promised so much, but Reconstruction delivered so little. In many ways, the struggle for civil rights on Long Island in the 1950's and 1960's repeated this pattern. High hopes for change were dashed by stiff opposition from white opponents of integration and the deep roots and tenacity of institutional segregation and racism.¹⁶