

**The History and Geography of Long Island**  
reprinted from the New York State WPA Guide  
edited by Kevin Bracht

Long Island, thrusting 125 miles eastward from New York Bay to a point abreast of New London, Connecticut, faces the New England coast across Long Island Sound on the north and fronts the open Atlantic on the south. The long, narrow outline of the island resembles that of a whale. Its eastern end is split by Peconic Bay and the 50-mile peninsulas thereby formed are the north and south 'flukes.'

Topographically the island is almost a plain. On the north coast bluffs rise to a height of 200 feet. South of these extending well into the island midriff, run several chains of hills, with High Hills, the highest point on the island, attaining an altitude of 410 feet. From these elevations the surface declines gently southward toward the sea, forming the great plain, well suited for agriculture. On the south shore, between Rockaway and South Hampton, the ocean waves break on a narrow ribbon of sand cut by several inlets and backed up by the waters of the Great South Bay. The west portion of this sandbar has been developed into a series of bathing resorts chief among which are Rockaway, Long and Jones Beaches.

Historians group the aboriginal inhabitants of Long Island, estimated never to have exceeded 1,000 in number, in two loose federations: the Montauk to the east, the Delaware to the West. No full blooded aborigine remains. His memory survives in the names he supplied for villages, streets, and bays; and the reservations marked off at Shinnecock and Poosepatuck are the only estates left to his mixed Negroid and Indian heirs.

In 1609 Henry Hudson, seeking the fabled northwest passage, entered New York Bay and landed on Coney Island. Hollanders settled on the western end of the island, but were slow in extending their settlements eastward. In the next generation the restless English, descending from Connecticut and the Bay colony, landed in Southampton, Southold, and other 'down east' points; by 1643 they were in Hempstead. The inevitable friction was followed by a division of control in 1650, the boundary line running from Oyster Bay south to the ocean. In 1664 the entire island became part of the Province of New York.

The island was little affected by events of the following two centuries. Slowly it gained in population, its economy built upon the soil and the bay waters. During the Revolution the east towns supported the patriots strongly, but by no means unanimously. In the western section there were many Tories who in the end paid heavily in confiscated estates for their preference for King George. After the Battle of Long Island in 1770, the English held the island in a firm grip until the final evacuation in 1784. During the War of 1812 the island was largely at the mercy of the British.

The whaling industry, a minor Colonial enterprise, boomed after the signing of peace. Sag Harbor and Greenport vessels covered much of the world in the hunt for oil and bone. The opening up of the West turned Long Island farmers more and more to truck gardening. Meantime the fisheries expanded to meet a growing demand; Saddle Rock and Blue Point oysters were called for the world over. Fish fertilizer is another Long Island product.

The coming of the railroad in the 1830's was the first step in modern transit. At first the inhabitants took to it unkindly; sparks from the engine burned their fields and destroyed their crops. In 1900 the Pennsylvania Railroad acquired control and provided for the Long Island Railroad a terminus in midtown Manhattan. The communication passenger traffic on the Long Island Railroad increased rapidly.

The island comprises four counties; Kings (Brooklyn), Queens, Nassau, and Suffolk. The first two are constituent parts of New York City, so that when a New Yorker speaks of Long Island he refers to Nassau and Suffolk. These two counties present a marked contrast. Nassau, with a population of more than 300,000 and an area of 252 square miles, is a congestion of bustling villages containing the homes of the hordes of executives, clerks, and artisans who are disgorged every evening from the metropolis. The soil is secondary. Suffolk, with half the population of Long Island and an area four times as large as Nassau, depends primarily on agriculture and fishing. Its farmers, fisherman, clammers, and local shop people live in scattered villages, many with white wood churches casting peaceful shadows on village greens reminiscent of the New England coast and countryside. The tempo of life is slow, and traditional mores govern.

The backbone of the economy of Suffolk is truck farming. The light topsoil is easily worked, and the gravelly subsoil provides excellent drainage. The growing season is long, rainfall is generally ample, and, most important of all, close at hand is the largest market in the world. The two chief crops are potatoes, and cauliflower. In 1930, Suffolk country produced 6,700,570 bushels of potatoes, more than twice as much as its nearest rival among the counties of the State; and Nassau grew 805,207 bushels. The average Suffolk cauliflower crop is 700,000 crates, comprising about seven-tenths of the State's total.

Livestock is largely limited to fowls; there are many eggs and broiler farms, but no reliable figures are available on output. The Long Island duckling has been well advertised and no doubt imposters have crept to restaurant tables on his fame; but he does exist 6,000,000 of him, whitening the shores of coves and canals from Speonk east, and adding from four to six million dollar to the yearly income of Long Island.

Oyster and clams furnish employment to a rather individualistic sector of the population - baymen of the south side and a smaller contingent out of the northern harbors. In 1930, the product of Nassau County waters was valued at \$157,926; that of Suffolk, far in the lead, \$880,795. Catering to the amateur fisherman is a thriving seasonal occupation calling for a rather heavy investment in a small boats for landlocked waters and larger ones to face the sea off Montauk or to plow through the tides of the inlets.

A large commuting population in its western quarter, farmers, fishermen and local shopkeepers - these are the foundations on which the island economy rests. During the winter months the communities go about their business quietly and methodically. With the coming of the summer month the island, with its bathing, beaches, camp sites, yacht clubs, golf clubs, polo clubs, fishing grounds, and State parks, becomes a playground for the metropolitan millions.

Hard-surfaced roads gridiron the western quarter of the island, but farther east the pattern becomes more diffuse. The west-to-east road system is admirably balanced; two highways serve the 'north shore,' two the 'south shore,' one the middle island belt - all supplemented by two excellent State parkways built with an eye to scenic effect and offering speedy access to points well inland. Extensions, which will ultimately take these parkways to most of the principal State parks, are being built as planned.

**A Guided Tour of Long Island's North Shore**  
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State 25A, reached from Manhattan Island via the Queensboro Bridge, serves the indented north shore of Long Island. Long Island Sound is always close and often in sight. Through some stretches the road, rising and dipping to the uneven surface, is bordered by oak-forest.

Manhasset (2,827 pop.) is one of the oldest communities on the north shore. Facing State 25A, opposite Shelter Rock Road, is the Friends Meeting House, built in 1810; greenish weathered shingles and gray slate roof give the two-story structure the appearance of age. The Onderdonk House, 2931 N. Hempstead Turnpike, built in 1836, is considered Long Island's finest example of Greek Revival architecture. The portico, two stories high, is composed of four Doric columns and triangular pediment, with the entrance doorway between the two left columns. One -story wings project from the main section.

Roslyn (970 pop.) stretching along the curving shore of Hempstead Harbor, is backed by the wooded slopes of the Wheatley Hills. For many years the settlement was known as the Town at the Head of the Head.

Sea Cliff (4,435 pop.) Originally planned as a summer resort but now a residential village, clings to the side of the hill.

Glen Cove (12,401 pop.) is one of Long Island's two incorporated cities and the business center of Cove neck. Its narrow and hilly streets hum with activity in summer when vacationers at Lattington, Glen Cove Landing, and Bayville, near - by seaside colonies, do the week end marketing.

Locust Valley (2,304 pop.) A residential community, historically interesting as the spot where Captain John Underhill acquired much land and lived his last years.

Matinecock (421 pop.) and Mill Neck (516 pop.) Links in the cross -neck road, are residential. The entire village Mill Neck and parts of the surrounding lands have been designated as a game sanctuary supported by private funds in co-operation with the State Conservation Department. There are approximately 3,800 acres of land and lakes; all wild life is protected and winter feeding is carried on.

Oyster Bay is generally known as the home Theodore Roosevelt (1859 - 1919), 26th President of the United States, but the neighboring incorporated village of Cove Neck (274 pop.), rightfully claims that honor, Sagamore Hill. The Roosevelt home on the east side of Moses Harbor is open only to Boy Scouts one day each year. The Roosevelt Grave, Young Memorial Cemetery, surrounded by an iron picket fence, looks over Moses Harbor.

Cold Spring Harbor (713 pop.) Was a whaling port in the middle years of the last century. So many languages were heard on its main street, now State 25A, that the thoroughfare was called Bedlam Street.

Huntington (6,603 pop.) At the foot of West and Dix Hills, spreads down tot he bay front. The British soldiery during the Revolution converted the old cemetery at the eastern end of the business section, into a fort, which, was grisly humor, the named the Fort Golgotha.

In the day of sail, ship out of Northport, (3709 pop.), circled the globe in search of markets for the expanding American trade. Between 1820 and 1884, 179 vessels were built

in Northport yards; and allied industries thrived, today the village is known as one of the most healthful in State and famous for the fine views from its wooded sloped.

State 25A touches the site of Fort Salonga. The fort was a British post captured and destroyed by the Continentals in 1781. Sunken Meadow State Park has a beach, picnic areas, and a playground for children.

In Kings Park (232 pop.) is Kings Park State Hospital, an institution for the insane. East of Kings Park are cabbage and cauliflower patches and potato fields.

At Smithtown (74 pop.) is the western junction with State 25 with which State 25A runs in common to Smithtown Branch (951 pop.).

Stony Brook (790 pop.) Is built on a hill sloping down to the water front. The houses are scattered along winding roads shaded with locusts and maples.

In a depression around the harbor of the same name lies Port Jefferson (2,465 pop.). Once a thriving shipbuilding town, it has today two lace factories and several gravel pits; summer visitors supplement its economy. The shipyard still brings a small income from custom-built cruisers, sloops, and pleasure crafts. A ferry (car and driver \$4, each passenger 75 cents) connects with Bridgeport, Connecticut.