

A Bit of Amityville History

By William T. Lauder, Village Historian, Village of Amityville

This outline is but a sampling of our rich history which started when the King of England claimed title to Long Island, and much more territory, by virtue of John Cabot's exploration in 1497. New England and the east end of L.I. were first settled by the English, while the Dutch moved into what they called New Amsterdam. In 1664 the English took that and renamed it New York City. By the 1630's some of the English came across the Sound, and from the east end to what is now Huntington. They had a law requiring who ever got a patent or grant from the king for land, must get a confirmatory deed from the local Indians. So our local recorded history starts in the 1650's when those settlers began to obtain deeds from the Indians for land in our immediate area because of their need for our salt hay. The L.I. aborigines were really all Algonkian Indians divided into 13 family groups which even today are wrongly called Tribes by some people. So it was that on August 17th 1658 the first deed to land in our area was obtained from chief Wyandanch, Grand Sachem of all the Long Island Indians. Tacpowsha, Chief of the local family group, called the Marsapeague's, consented to it. The deed covered east to west, what the Indians called Spurway and Arauca and the English called Josiah's Neck and West Neck South. These two areas, mostly marsh, constituted what is now Amityville south of the old Indian Path, now called Merrick Road, formerly known as Kings Highway, South Country Road or Main Street. Later, the settlers acquired grants and deeds to the up lands in our area too.

As a farming, hunting and fishing community on the Great South Bay, it grew and became a commercial hub serving the interior communities to the north. We were near two inlets to the ocean and had two mills to grind grain and saw wood, Carmen's Mill on the west border and the Oakley-Ireland Mill on the big stream thru the middle of the settlement. Both mills were located on the north side of that old Indian Path. Life was serene without much excitement until the Revolution. Although not a battle ground, the British forged the area for supplies and deserters which was not pleasant for the locals, many of whom volunteered to serve in the army of the insurgents.

After the war in April 1790, we had the honor of a visit by President George Washington. While traveling along what had been Kings Highway, then called South Country Road, he stopped for lunch at the home and former inn of one Zebulon Ketcham. The house was just east of Ketcham's Creek on the north side of the road and has since been moved by barge to the east side of south Bayview Avenue. In 1793 the Methodists, the most populous religious group, established the first church & located it on Main Street just west of Broadway.

Up until 1845 the area had been called Huntington South or Huntington West Neck south and was confused with West Neck up in Huntington. In addition, the locals wanted to create a sense of their own identity. So, at a tumultuous meeting where several alternatives were discussed, some say that the largest local land owner, Samuel Ireland, who wanted to go home, said "Lets name it after my boat *Amity*, and so it was. This change was helpful in 1850 when they applied for their own Post Office. By 1858, in addition to the Post Office, Church and mills there was also in town a school, blacksmith's shop, doctor, shoe shop, two general stores, hotel and a Stage Stop at Carman's Tavern. The locals spent a lot of time farming, chopping wood, clamming, and fishing, the produce of which they sold to the up landers and shipped by local schooners to the city. Also by that time they had sufficient political influence to be able to designate prominent Amityville resident Richard J. Cornelius as one of only two then N.Y.S. Assemblymen elected from Suffolk County.

Upon the coming of the Civil War, a number of local youth, black & white, volunteered for Army Service & ultimately some were casualties. After the war, the South Side Railway, later called the Long Island Rail Road, arrived in Amityville in 1867. This was a very significant event because it changed the character of the area from a strictly rural farming and fishing village to a very accessible suburb of the 'big city'. Within only an hour's ride (now it takes 60 minutes) on the railroad out to bay front village, with access by ferry to the beaches, we became a summer resort for the rich and well born of New York City. Several grand hotels and many large summer 'cottages' sprang up and the lifestyle of the community was changed forever. This status continued thru 1914.

During that time in 1872, the locals and their neighboring communities, seceded from the Town of Huntington and its seat of government on the on the North Shore, which was a long horse and wagon ride away. They formed the new Town of Babylon with a more local Town government. That same year saw the construction of a new, larger wooden school house, since moved to its present location on the west side of Broadway opposite the head of Avon Place.

The 1880's saw the beginning of construction of a large private hospital complex. In 1884 an earthquake struck and cracked some local walls. Indoor plumbing became fashionable. In 1889 a short lived Amityville Yacht Club was formed. Continuing the community prominence, The Bank of Amityville formed in 1891 as the first and only bank in the entire Town of Babylon. By the 1890's we had several local newspapers, one of which, *The Dispatch* was the forerunner of *The Amityville Record*. The 1890's saw construction of the Triangle Building, the New Point Hotel, the Lyceum and a new Brick High School, now called Park North. In 1894, Amityville became an Incorporated Village with its own President (Mayor) and Board of Trustees. In 1897 the Amityville Club, and in 1900 Umpqua Corinthian Yacht Club were formed.

In 1904 the Literary Society was organized and shortly named the Mary P. Myron Literary Society. Several social clubs and fraternal organizations, now long gone, came into existence. By 1907 we had a second bank, The First National and Trust Co. In 1909 the cross island Trolley from Halesite, Huntington reached us. In 1910 the Hathaway Inn opened and the east-west Babylon Trolley made a terminus in Amityville. Each trolley lasted only until the 1920's when the automobile when the automobile was perfected and the roads paved. 1914 saw the start of World War I and we had a second weekly newspaper, 'The Amityville Sun'. In 1916, Lawrence Sperry launched the first unmanned guided missile from Amityville. 1917 saw 171 brave young men from the village signed up to go over "Over There" "to end all wars." After the end of World War I there were some changes such as the replacement of the original Gazebo and Horse Trough in front of the Triangle Building with a flag pole and Memorial clock and Prohibition in 1919. This brought Alphonse Capone as a summer resident.

By the 1920's the ever easterly advancing Sunrise Highway reached our western boarder; we had a new high school; our first school kindergarten class; new Village Hall; new library building; electric trains; and paved roads. In 1929, Jones' Beach State Park and the State Channel were opened and ferry service to the ocean beach ended. Two months later we experienced the stock market crash and accompanying Great Depression with all its dislocations, lost jobs, poverty and changes in life style for many.

1930 saw the relocation of the graves in the abandoned cemetery on the north side of Park Avenue to make way for a new grade school. There was a standstill for everything else including the dredging and development of the marshes at the end of Richmond Avenue. Then Sunrise Highway was extended thru the northern part of the Village in 1932. We experienced a serious hurricane in 1938. The depression dragged on and the various Government stimulus programs failed to work, just is the case today.

Unfortunately World War II started in Europe in 1939. They say it is an ill wind that blows no good, and as terrible as the war in Europe was, it generated the tremendous aeronautical manufacturing complex and accompanying jobs just to the north of us in Farmingdale. Sadly, it took that to end the Depression and restart the local national economy. In 1940, after much studying and agonizing, the Village fathers purchased the acreage, all marsh, at the foot of Bayview Avenue owned by Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, great grandson of Commodore Vanderbilt, and the new Village Beach was opened. Not much else happened ... everyone was too absorbed with the war effort. After the U. S. formerly entered the war in December of 1941, the young men were drafted and the women and old men went to work in the air plane plants. There were rotating shortages, 'make do' and sadness for the next four years and everything, but the War Effort, came to a screeching halt.

Immediately after the end of the war in 1945, everyone in the country played 'catch up'. An increased population was on the horizon. The second Amityville Yacht Club was formed in 1948. Having possible crowding in mind, up-zoning was wisely applied in the Village wherever feasible. Then in 1950, a new

High School on Merrick Road was built and another widening of Broadway took place in the Village shopping area. Oak Street was wisely extended from Broadway to the west. In 1957 our "Free Public Library" became a School District "Public Library."

In the 1960's a new junior high was built on North Broadway. North East and West Elementary Schools were built too. The new east-west Inside Bay Channel was dredged; Edna H. Pearsall donated her home on Bayview Avenue as a Park in 1968. A new Village Hall was opened on the north side of Greene Avenue. The Women's Club wisely created an Active Council. Out of that in 1969 spun the idea of creating the Amityville Historical Society. The society was given the former old Bank of Amityville building by the Franklin National Bank and the Lauder Museum was opened in 1972. This added to the historic and cultural heart of the Village in the Triangle area. A new Library building was built on the north east corner of Oak and John Streets. The new Massapequa Mall to our west affected our down town shopping area. The Water Company Office on Oak Street moved and the old tall water tower was razed.

The 1970's saw the landmark hotels New Point and Hathaway, burned and the west wing of the Park North School building demolished. With the population growth continuing, there was much construction of cooperative apartments, multifamily housing and Condo complexes which has continued up to the present, and hopefully has ended. The LIRR was elevated, a new fire house was built, and the small original wooden Fire House was moved from Greene Avenue to Ireland Place. Brunswick Hospital was enlarged and made the largest private hospital in the country and finally, much needed sewers were installed.

The community was beginning to mature and in the 1980's saw changes in the Village Triangle including a new gazebo and rededication of the World War I Memorial Clock to all military veterans. The under used Amityville Theatre was closed and turned into office space. A deliberate spirit of planning set in to cope with the continuing population growth and there was an attempt to preserve our heritage and encourage a quasi-Colonial look to new commercial construction. A Historical District was established for lower Broadway, and later extended.

In 1990 talented local Artists formed the Amityville Artist's Circle.

In 1994, the 100th Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Village was celebrated yearlong. The Municipal Building built in 1924 was refurbished and renamed the William J. Kay, Memorial Building for the former Chief of Police.

In 1995, the Amityville Historical Society held a 50th Anniversary Reception Commemorating the end of World War II and honoring all Veterans.

1997 saw a Village Planning Charrette attended by over a hundred interested citizens; the entrance signs to the Village were refurbished.

1999 – Construction started on a new Park Ave School gymnasium connecting the Park Central and Park South School Buildings.

2000 saw the sad demolition of the tremendous elm tree on the north side of Merrick Road west of Broadway due to infestation by Asian beetles.

In 2002 a Memorial Garden was made within Pearsall Park in Memory of Peter O'Neill, one of the innocents who perished in that travesty committed by our sworn enemies on September 11th 2001; A new Memorial Park was created at the east corner of Broadway and the LIRR in place of what had become an eye sore; Vittorio's Restaurant opened; The American Legion building on Park Avenue was sold and The American Legion moved to Copiague.

In 2003 new facades, duplicating the Victorian originals, were placed on #s 178 and 180 Park Avenue by Warren Cohen; A new Marine Park on the southeast corner of Ocean Avenue and Merrick Road replaced a slum; Rosalyn bank opened a branch at the southeast corner of Richmond Avenue and Merrick Road; The exterior of the Lauder Museum was refurbished awning added and parking field fenced.

2004 was the 100th anniversary of the Mary P. Myton Literary Society; Fisher's Confectionary closed after 65 years in business; The Jewish Temple closed; The new connecting building between Park South

and Park Central Schools on Park Avenue finally opened; A new County Park was created on the bay at the foot of Unqua Place; The 1897 Amityville Club House was refurbished; Stop & Shop opened a Super Store on the old Ketchum/Kress farm site on the north side of Merrick Road east of Bayview Avenue.

In 2006 Brunswick General Hospital founded in 1887, finally closed, but other parts of the complex continued in operation; There was an acquisition of a water front site at the western Village entrance on Merrick Road and a new sign and shrubbery added; A New ordinance limiting further auto sales on Merrick Rd was enacted; The Bay Village Civic Association formed.

2007 – The old Creamery complex on Wellington Place at the foot of RR Avenue was replaced with another Senior Condominium; The Village adopted an Official Pennant; The Public Library became 100 years old; Island Drafting Institute 50 years old; Le Bourget Alliance was 30 years old.

2008 – Closure and razing of the Amity Chevy dealership at County Line Road and Merrick Road was replaced with a large new full-service CVS store.

The venerable R. J. Cornelius House on Ketchum Avenue which had survived a move to that spot from Merrick Road some years ago was demolished to make way for a new strip mall; Peterkin Park was renovated; Powell Funeral Home celebrated its 100th anniversary; Narrasketuck Yacht club was 75 years old; The New Village Hall on the north side of Ireland Place opened and its predecessor at 21 Greene Avenue was put up for sale or rent and the original 1924 Village Hall at 16 Greene Avenue was razed but the large eagle rampant was saved.

2009 – Frost Lane dedicated to the Memory of Louise A. Lynch, another who lost her life in the 9/11 travesty; New Village Hall dedicated; 100th Anniversary of the Huntington Trolley celebrated; Twelve Year Mayor Peter Umberto reelected with Trustees Casserly Johnson, Slack and Ubert

2010 – The Historical Society held its 41st Annual Heritage Fair; Suffolk County National Bank opens an office on Merrick Road; The Village named 'Tree City' for 24th year ... and so on and on, yesterday being today's history.

Our total population now is only about 10,500, and notwithstanding the changes, the Village has retained and polished its rural-suburban charm.

Amityville is a pleasant and friendly South Bay Village in which to live, work and play,

For more history and facts, be sure to visit and join the Amityville Historical Society and read its Quarterly News Letter, "The Dispatch."