

Queens

Waterfront History

By Jim Driscoll

Since the county of Queens was made up of very independent towns and villages until 1898, and is still the least unified borough of New York City, it is impossible to speak of the Queens shoreline as a single entity.

Jamaica Bay and Rockaway. Members of the Canarsie Tribe were the first inhabitants of this area. The earliest European settlers of Rockaway included Richard Cornell. There is a landmarked Cornell Cemetery in Far Rockaway. Some of the islands in Jamaica Bay were occupied by fisherman in the 19th Century. The Rockaways were attracting visitors for their sea breezes as early as 1800. The improvement in transportation by the arrival of the Long Island Railroad furthered its development as a middle and working class resort by 1900. The 1920s saw the destruction of the shell fishing industry on Jamaica Bay. The New Deal era led to development of Jacob Riis Park. After WWII suburban housing projects and Idlewild Airport were built along the Bay.

The North Shore. The earliest inhabitants of the North Shore were the Matinecoc Indians who had settlements that extended from present-day Flushing along northern Long Island. The Dutch and the English began settling in the area around 1645. The earliest settlers of Bayside didn't actually settle on the bay, but settled in an area called the Alley. This was a waterway that traveled from Little Neck Bay as far inland as the Alley Pond. There were summer hotels on Little Neck Bay in the mid-19th century that attracted vacationers from Manhattan. The most popular was the Crocheron. The Matinecocs used Little Neck Bay for shell fishing and local residents would continue to fish in the Bay down to the modern era when pollution destroyed the shell fish business. Across from Bayside is Douglaston. In the mid-19th century this was mostly an estate belonging to George Douglas. The arrival of the Long Island Railroad led to further development. Douglas Manor, an upscale real estate development on Little Neck Bay, was developed in the early twentieth century. This early subur-

banization of the area prevented the commercialization of the coast. The Shore Road in Douglaston is one of the few scenic shore roads in the city.

By the middle of the 19th century, factories were built in College Point. The first, the Poppenhusen hard rubber factory was established along the waterfront in 1854. By the end of the 19th century shorefront picnic grounds, such as Witzels Point View, were popular destinations for outings by Manhattan political and social groups. A ferry service to Manhattan and the Bronx continued until the opening of the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge in the late 1930s. Whitestone developed more slowly than the other villages in this area. A number of wealthy businessmen, such as Samuel Leggett, built mansions along the beautiful shoreline in the early 1800s. The area became more developed after the arrival of the Long Island Railroad in 1868. Industries and resorts started appearing along the coast, but much of the coastline remained residential. Beechurst, a suburban community at



Broad Channel Island

South Street Seaport Museum

the eastern end of Whitestone, that advertised its coastal attractions, was established in the early 20th century. This community remains completely residential.

The Upper East River. The first inhabitants were American Indians who farmed on the upland and gathered fish and shellfish from the waters of the East River. The earliest European settlement was probably the village of Flushing, which was established by the English and Dutch in 1645. This was an important village from the start because of its location on Flushing Creek (a tidal estuary). The creek was an active waterway from colonial days. Steamboat traffic from Flushing to lower Manhattan began in the 1820s. Much of the creek was done away with when dams were built to create artificial lakes on the World's Fair Grounds in the late 1930s. Although rowing meetings took place on Flushing Creek until the beginning of the 20th century, more and more it was being taken over for commercial use. By 1900 gravel yards and asphalt factories start dotting the shore.

To the west of the creek is Flushing Bay. The western shore of the bay used to be called North Beach and beginning in the 1880s was the site of a Coney Island-style amusement park. LaGuardia Airport was built in the 1930s. Further west is Bowery Bay. There were two islands off the shore of the Bay: Berrian's Island and Rikers Island. Berrian was eventually attached to the mainland by landfill is the now the site of a huge Con Edison Plant. Rikers Island, originally farmland, is now attached to Queens by bridge and is the home of a city prison. By the 1870s, the Steinway family moved their piano factory to northern Astoria along the water, now just east of the Con Ed plant, and built a company town to go with it.

At the extreme western end of this part of the waterfront is Old Astoria. The village of Astoria, which is located near the shores of Hallett's Cove, was incorporated in 1839. It was a residential area but there were some factories and other commercial activities along the shore. Separating the village and Ward's Island is the famous Hell Gate channel. Long famous as a graveyard for ships, the Army Corps of Engineers detonated a series of explosions in the 1870s and 1880s that destroyed submerged rocks and made it a relatively safe passage.

West Queens. Dutch and English farmers arrived in the middle of the 17th century. Three of the early communities were Ravenswood, Hunters Point and Dutch Kills. Ravenswood was the name of a community of beautiful estates on the East River that disappeared by the early 20th century as the area became more commercial. It is now known mostly as the site of huge Con Edison Plants. The commercial development of Hunters Point took off with the arrival of the Long Island Railroad and regular ferry service to Manhattan in the 1850s. By the 1870s the shore of Hunters Point was lined with oil refineries including one owned by Standard Oil. The area around the Dutch Kills, a branch of the Newtown Creek,

underwent a similar development with the arrival of railroad service and a growing need for industrial space.

The Queens and Brooklyn coasts of Newtown Creek have been industrial centers since the mid-19th century. The first settlement in Queens was in Maspeth near the creek in 1642. Destroyed by the Indians, a second settlement was on Smith Island just off the East River coast. In the early 1800s DeWitt Clinton had his summer residence in Maspeth near the creek. Spurred by the need for industrial production more and more factories were being built along Newtown Creek beginning in the 1860s. Smith Island (later called Furman Island) was attached to the mainland. The Furman estate was once known for its trout streams, now it was filled with warehouses and factories. The industries in this area were of the dirtiest type—oil refining, manufacturing fertilizers, tanning, acid production, etc. By 1900 the creek was an environmental nightmare. §

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Sources: New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan; the Queens Borough Chamber of Commerce; various books by Vincent Seyfried; Various old newspaper articles..