



Long Island: From Sea Shells to Suburbia



The Algonquian's called Long Island "Sewanhacky" roughly translated it means Place of Shells.

New Englanders first came to Long Island by boat and settled the area of Suffolk County.



The Hempstead Plains, located in the middle of Long Island was a large grassy common lands that early townspeople used for grazing cattle and other livestock. Much of LI at this time was made up of small clusters of homes, farms, and fishing villages.





Agricultural activities were pursued on Long Island throughout its early history. In about 1820 only 5% of the population lived in “urban” areas – the remaining 95% lived on farms. As early as 1840, farmers used the Long Island Rail Road system as a means to get their produce to market. This is Garner’s farm in Wantagh where they are growing potatoes.

On Long Island the largest cultivated crop was corn, followed by oats and potatoes, according to the 1840 census. Farmers also produced wheat, hay, rye, barley, flax, cucumbers, cauliflower, pumpkins and cranberries. They raised livestock as well. There were horses and mules, cattle, sheep and pigs. Later, farmers would raise ducks. Long Island duck reached its peak in the 1960's when farms here produced 7.5 million ducks a year for restaurants.





By about 1850 in the town of Hempstead, the common lands started to be sold off. In 1866, the town gave 40 acres of land to Queens County Agricultural Society “for the promotion of agriculture.” This land was used as the Mineola Fair Grounds until 1937.

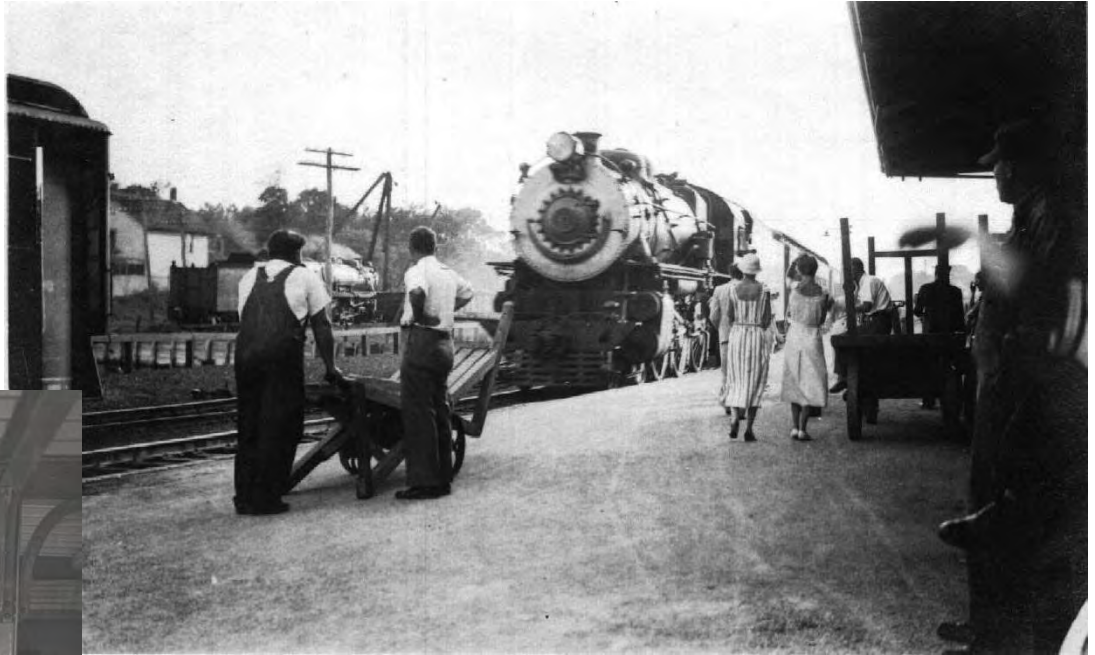
Long Island's Baymen fished the waters around the island for many years, this photo is from the 1920's. Clams and other fish are still sold at markets both locally and around the world.



1899



Massapequa, 1953



Greenport c.1920's

As more branches of the railroad were built, towns began to grow larger.



These homes in Garden City were built to house workers who would commute by train into the city to work at A. T. Stewart's Department Store in the late 1800's. Stewart incorporated the Central Railroad of Long Island and in 1873 it ran from the city through Garden City to a brickyard in Bethpage and docks in Babylon.

By the 1900 census, the population on Long Island was 133,000 and there were still more individuals who lived in Suffolk Co. than Nassau by over 20,000 people.



Long Beach Hotel, 1909.



In about 1880, the Long Beach Association had begun to develop land so that people could enjoy the ocean. The property on Long Beach was sold to William H. Reynolds, who had developed Miami Beach, Florida as a resort city. By 1909, Reynolds wanted to make further developments to the property on Long Beach.



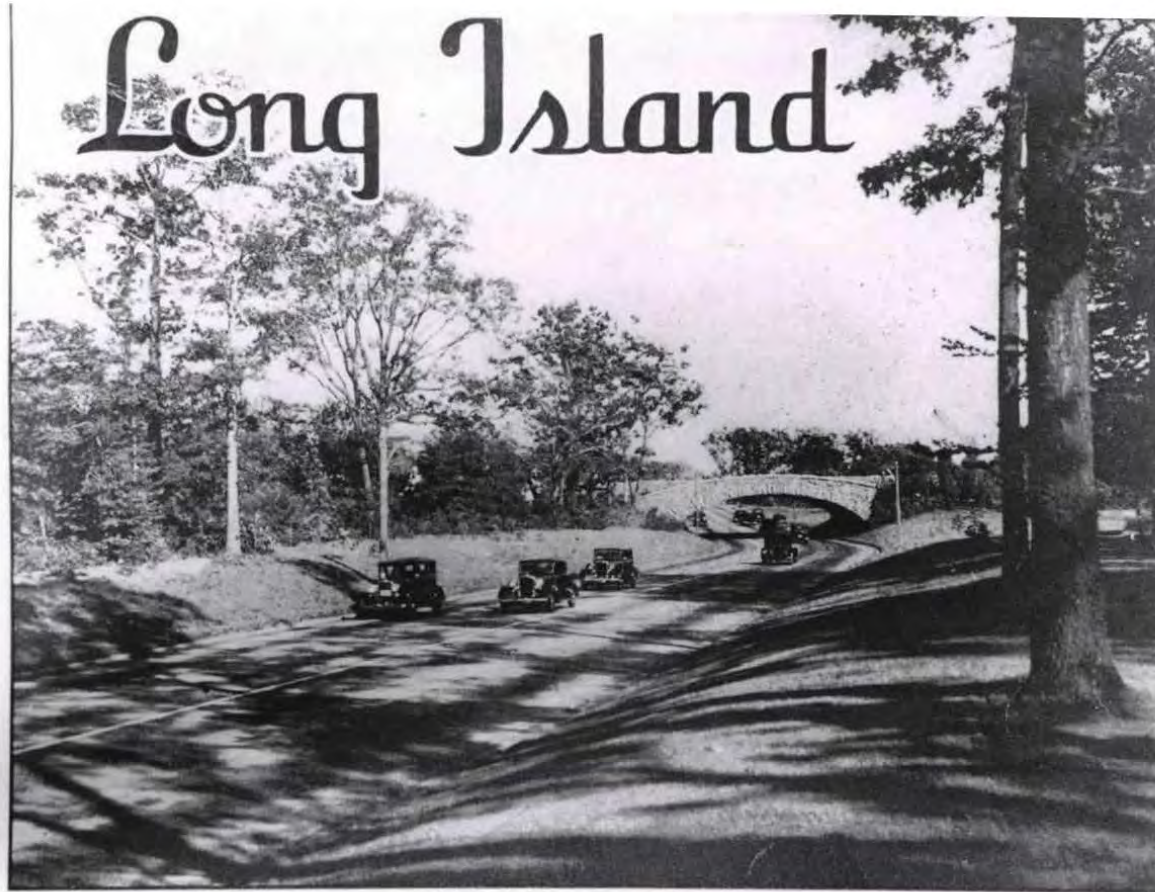
Long Beach in 1920.

Long Beach in 1931.

Long Beach and other beach communities were initially built as resort areas for the wealthy. Links to the railroad were extremely important to bolster the tourist trade.



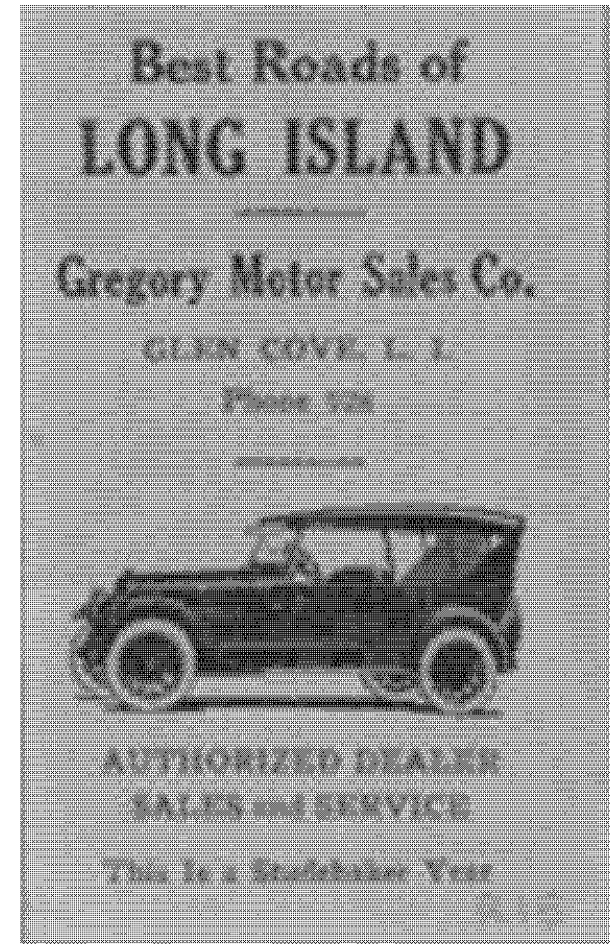
While the railroad was the key to success throughout the late 1800's the car eventually became LI's preferred mode of transportation. Because of the car, the towns in between the railway stops developed at breakneck speed.



The Motorists' Paradise



Good roads were a selling point for real estate developers. Many touted the good roads and fresh air to their city clients. The original roads were not made of macadam or packed dirt, but were covered in Oyster shells.



Massapequa Hotel, 1901. The Automobile Club of Long Island gathers for a photo.





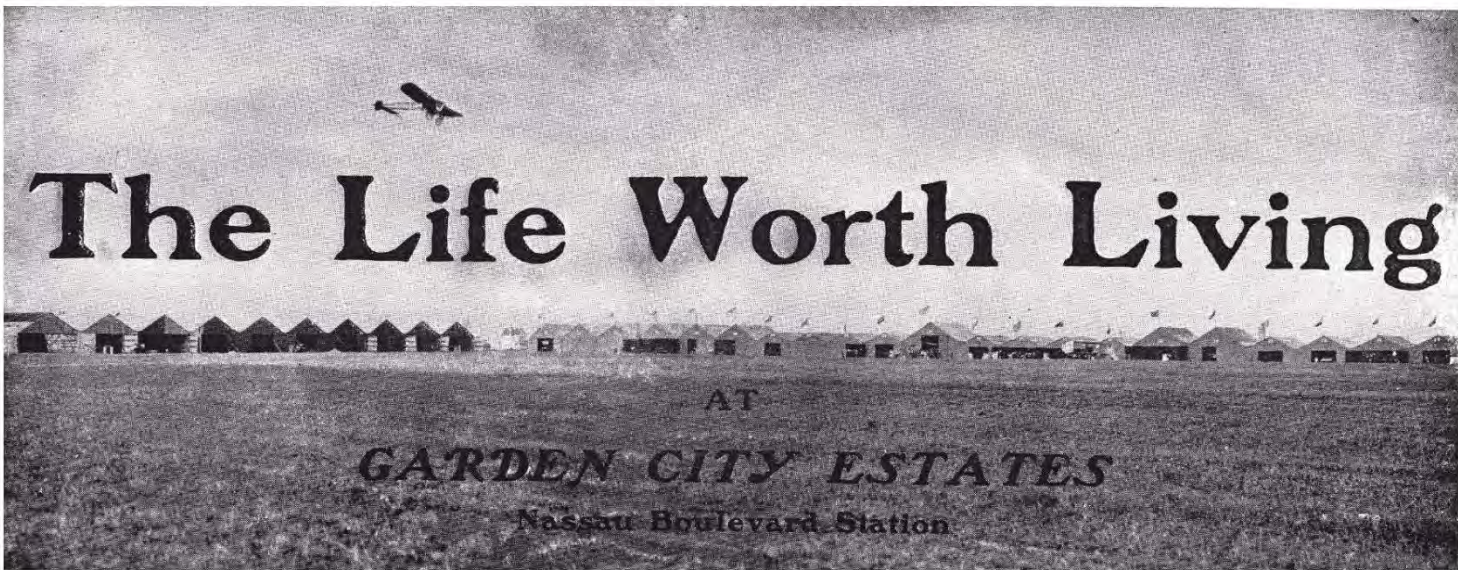
Wealthy homeowners on Long Island purchased cars so that they would have more controlled access to both business and pleasure. This is William Hofstra's 1924 Rolls Royce driven by his chauffeur. The garages stood behind Hofstra Hall and the chauffeur's family lived in an apartment above the garage.



As large estates, like the Mackay estate pictured here, were sold, large developments with smaller suburban homes and streets were created. This home, known as Harbor Hill was built by Stanford White and was completed in 1902. By 1948 the house was dynamited and sold off for residential development.

This map depicts the same property that the Mackay estate stood on, now with suburban homes.





In 1911, more of the Hempstead Plains was developed for suburban living.

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The 1900's – 1940's were a period of vast growth on LI, it was in this time period when the first big suburban real estate boom began. As Nassau County overtook Suffolk in population (Nassau had 126,000 to Suffolk's 110,000 in the 1920 census) the farms began to be sold off and "neighborhoods" were built. Nassau County was deemed the fastest growing county in the US in the years between 1920 and 1930.

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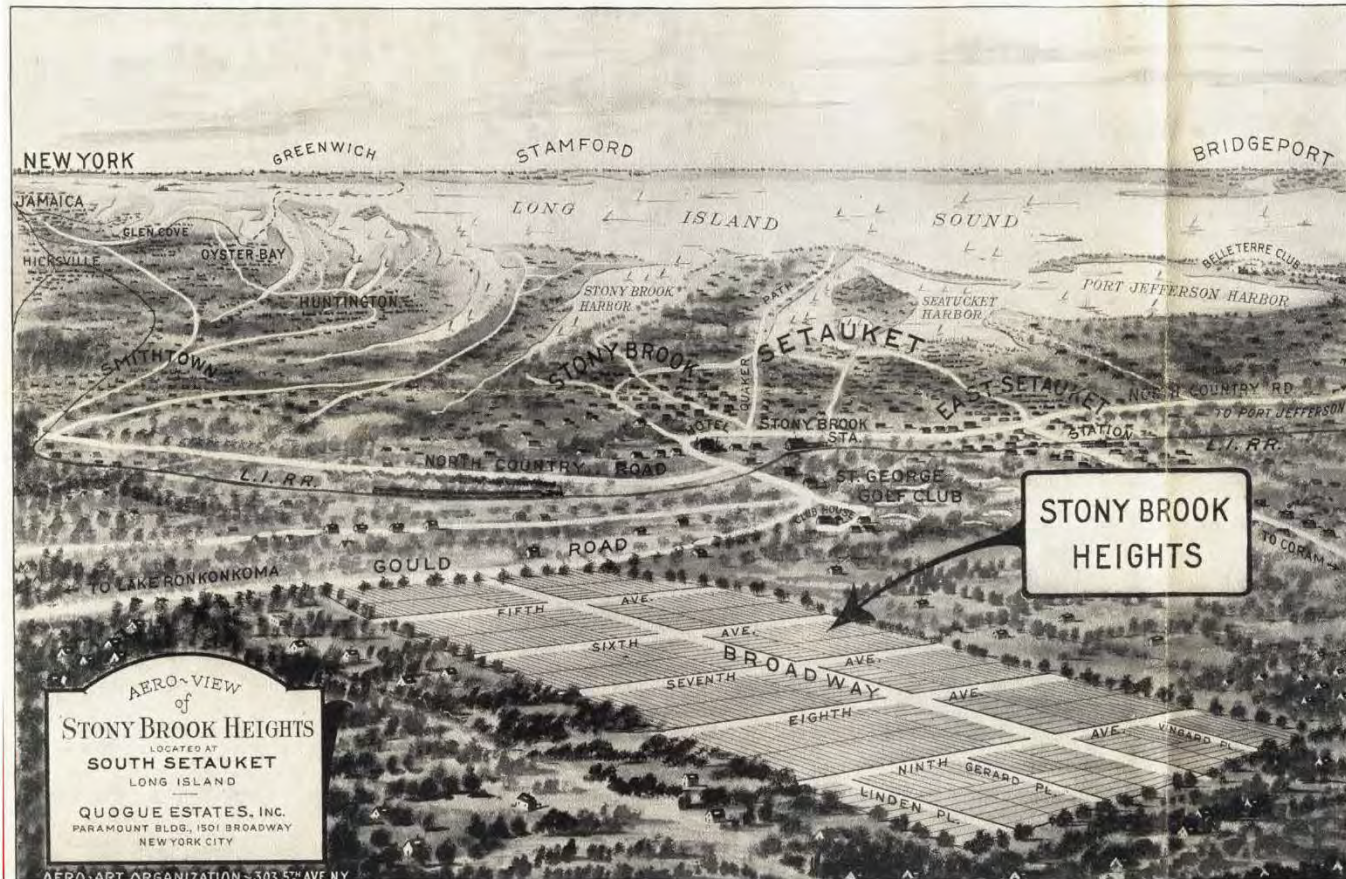
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The suburban movement spread from west to east across Long Island and as land became available. Additional farm land was sold off and more homes were built for an ever-growing suburban- hungry population.

Appealing to clients' sense of aesthetics was a common way to sell real estate. People wanted comfort, views, and recreational facilities nearby. Most of the residents of these new homes were commuters – they lived in suburban neighborhoods but commuted into New York City. They were salaried, white-collar workers who wanted to own their own homes





By the late 1940's after World War II the demand for housing was at its peak. Levittown changed the nature of building homes. These mass-produced houses were simultaneously built and sold to a public that was hungry for affordable housing.



This is a photo of first home buyers, moving into Levittown, 1947. Veterans of World War II received a better deal, as well as, government backed loans.

The 1940's middle class African American population was also looking for homes in the suburbs, unfortunately they were not given the same opportunities as their white counterparts. This development in Jamaica actually used this trend to appeal to those looking for diverse suburban living.



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As new developments were built and roads were improved people moved around Long Island itself and the nature of commuting began to change. This is Merrick Road c.1950.





In the 1900's a good portion of the Hempstead Plains had been used for the newly developed aviation industry. Roosevelt Field was first an actual field for flying. It was where Charles Lindbergh and other early pilots took off. In the 1950's, Roosevelt Field Shopping Center was built on the site of the former runways and hangars.



Roosevelt Field in the 1960's – still an open air mall.

Shopping centers grew on Long Island and in 1956, three malls opened – Roosevelt Field, Green Acres and Mid-Island Plaza (now known as the Broadway Mall).

Roosevelt Field today.



Hempstead, which was known as the “HUB” from the late 1800’s through the 1950’s as it was the center for trade and transportation for Long Island, became in need of revitalization. The 1960’s saw the malls bring Long Islanders away from the original downtown areas and into malls and strip malls located on streets away from the center of town.





The once popular downtown area of Hempstead shows wear and tear in the 1970s and some suburban neighborhoods take on a more urban feel.





By the middle of the 20th century, Long Island was home to over a million people and the suburbs were more than sleepy villages loosely connected by small roads. Major parkways, train lines and expressways moved all these people in and out of New York City, as well as, around Long Island. And while the concept of “continuous sprawl” was foreign to the developers of the early 1900’s, and what they originally envisioned, Long Island was no longer a smattering of small towns that catered to the needs of its residents, with clean air, proximity to recreation and an easy commute for the head of household’s in to their place of business.

What will suburbia look like in the future?



How do we re-shape our Long Island neighborhoods, the roads we travel and the businesses we need every day to accommodate our current population? This is a puzzle that should concern everyone who lives on Long Island.