

OUR FEATURED SPONSOR

FROM KINGS PARK, WITH PRIDE

A native daughter details her hometown history

BY
RACHEL WALLACK

IN KINGS PARK, IF YOU SLOW DOWN just enough to listen, you will hear the sacred whistle of the train, and the distinct sound of wheels turning. This is a sign that the town is moving towards the future. The story of my hometown is not a tale that will woo the world with its intrigue and mystique. But in a search for the truth I found a reality that is far more interesting than any fabricated lore; it upholds an honesty that pervades the good and the bad, the written and the spoken, the recollections whispered and the remembrances shared. Through interviews with locals whose families have lived here for centuries, and diligent notes from Miles Borden's *History of Kings Park*, I dug beneath the superficial to surface with a true history of Kings Park. It is not all perfectly packaged and it is certainly not all politically correct, but it is loyal to the past and indicative of what is to come from this outspoken town on the north shore of Long Island.

Life on Main Street will continue to function as it did before I united these stories. But here stands a collection of truths that honor those that have come before and lived on through this town. Kings Park began as an area of forested obscurity, developed into a railroad terminal of goodwill and flourished as a family-oriented community. The sound of change has grown louder with time as challenges have arisen to test the town's ability to adjust. But through the years the greatest force in town seems to have changed the least; the united voice of the people that live in Kings Park, the people that have remained true to their ideals, reflects a commitment that is often underrated in an over-complicated world.

Residents of Kings Park are dedicated to their families and responsible to their community. It is this honest drive, positive energy and proud spirit that indicates to anyone paying attention that life here has its own agenda. Locals tend to take a stand on the issues that affect their lives and those of their neighbors because it is what they believe is right. Through the years, Kings Park has lost money by sticking to intuition and following high ideals when it comes to property development and possible advances in local construction. But what it has given up is minimal in comparison to what the community has gained from holding true to its values. It is rare to find community-minded dedication to education, town pride and family, which takes precedence over individual concerns. Kings Park does not plan to give up on the features that have brought people here for as long as history has been recorded. From the encouragement of immigration in town, to the installation of excellence in education, Kings Park remains a beacon to visitors and a comfort to community members that could not imagine living any place else.

THE SOUND TO THE SMITHS

THROUGHOUT THE NORTHEASTERN LONG ISLAND town of Kings Park, the train sounds its welcome as it has done for more than 130 years, since its enthusiastic arrival in 1872. It is a signal that life is in motion; commuters are traveling west to New York City and returning to their families at night; visitors are arriving on the new electric trains to enjoy local parks and beaches; and locals are moving east towards Port Jefferson or west towards the city for both business and recreation. Kings Park's history is undeniably intertwined with the installation of the railroad, yet this was not always the force behind the town, socially or economically.

Water was the resource that first propelled Kings Park, a town forty-five miles east of New York City, onto the map. In the late 1800s, local waterways were the center of the transport universe for goods and ensured the town's survival. Boats were in constant motion, carrying local lumber and farm harvests to nearby towns barely accessible by land, and the seemingly unreachable New York City. Early inhabitants of any area know that accessibility to water is crucial, and this, along with the abundance of seafood, game and farmland, drew Nesequake Indians to the shores of Long Island. Although these self-sufficient Native Americans may have arrived as early as 5,000 years ago, they could not stop New Englanders from crossing the Long Island Sound in the 1600s to enjoy the island's benefits. The history of Native American loss of land in America is wrought with conflict because local lands were

claimed when outsiders arrived. Unfortunately, the contentious land ownership problem was never ameliorated, but we honor those that cherished this land before anyone else knew of its existence.

Richard “Bull” Smith gained ownership of the region deemed Smithtown in 1665 by riding a clear path for his family to follow in the future. As elementary school students we heard the tale of Richard Smith. The legend stated that he rode through town claiming all land that he covered on his bull. Although the township still bears his name, the truth behind the story and the fairness of his claim remain open to interpretation.



Night Train Archive Photo

Richard “Bull” Smith Memorial

The house still standing in San Remo reminds us that his grandson Obadiah established a home across the Nissequogue River from Smithtown, in Kings Park. Obadiah Smith’s great-great-granddaughter, Marian Smith Lederman, resided in a historical family farmhouse and was active in the Kings Park Methodist Church until her passing in 1996. She represented the cohesive force that ties the residents of today to their ancestors. Although she is no longer in the old farmhouse, it remains part of her family’s legacy to the people and the town they left behind.

The roots of Kings Park spread deep in the landscape, as families that came from very different beginnings intertwined culturally and professionally in town. This growth was not always free from tragedy and politics, but it was a strong start for the community, and eventually created a tradition of tolerance in Kings Park. Early immigrants paved the way for the appreciation of diversity that exists in the area today, but history also records the mistakes of the past. Before the abolition of slavery in New York on July 4, 1827, slaves were common throughout Long Island, including Kings Park. One former slave for the Smith family, Katherine Jane Smith, made a name for herself with her resilience and ingenuity, in spite of the limitations of slavery. Although she was *freed* by law at age seven, Katy continued to work for the Smith family until her passing in 1902. Many locals say that she was considered an honorary family member, but the depth of her significance to the family and community can be seen today. Not only was she honored with a place in the Smith family plot in the Smithtown Cemetery, but also the town appreciated her spirit. Katy was a resourceful woman that earned extra money by providing laundering services to townspeople. She saved

enough to establish her independence in a two-room house behind the main Smith residence. Katy rented out the second room of her house to Irish immigrants that were drawn to the town by the Kings County Farm and Asylum.

When I visited with Leo Ostebo, a familiar face from my high school days and current director of the Kings Park Heritage Museum, he enthusiastically related the following story. The Murphy Brothers were two Irishmen that lived in Katy Smith's extra room after arriving in Kings Park. They most likely worked at the local hospital and rented the space for little money in the small house on Smith property. In the early 1900s, Katy passed away, leaving a local man that townspeople called Murphy living in her old residence. This man was not actually related to the old Murphy brothers, but linked to them instead through the history of the house. In Mr. Ostebo's story it was a badge of honor and tribute to history that an Ethiopian settler in Kings Park got his traditional Irish nickname, *Murphy*. I agree with this conclusion and the words of Suffolk County Police Commissioner Richard Dormer when he deems Kings Park a town that attracts immigrants like a beacon.

THE PROMISES OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW with current Police Commissioner, Chief Richard Dormer, I discovered a personal truth behind these stories from Kings Park's past. Chief Dormer spoke of his rebirth on what he considers his second birthday, March 25, 1958; this was the day he first stepped off the train into Kings Park, his gateway into this country. Not only was this his first plane experience, his first train ride, but also Kings Park was his first stop in his new life in America. As an eighteen-year-old boy from Newtown, Crettyard, Ireland, it was in Kings Park that he uncovered his talent for criminal justice and his full desire to succeed.

As a young boy he worked in the local Kings County Hospital, as did many other immigrants in town, but he set lofty goals for himself that he pursued until he earned his college degree in criminal justice and his MBA. He did not accept limitations, thus he continued on in both the military and police force until he was a Three-Star Chief, and the Suffolk County Police Commissioner. Aside from the impressive titles, it was here that he developed the childhood lessons instilled in him by his Irish Catholic mom, and practiced his plan to "do the right thing." This included not only improving the department with programs such as COPE and a bicycle division of the force that began with borrowed bikes,

but also touching our lives in his effort to foster tolerance among the residents of Suffolk County. Commissioner Dormer's first beat was a foot post walking the very area he originally stepped off the train in Kings Park. He reminisced with me that that Main Street is still the wealth of pizza places it was back then as he sampled his first New York slice. Suffolk County Police Commissioner Dormer still sees this country "as a beacon" to immigrants dreaming of a better life in America. "People may be coming from a different place today, but they still have stars in their eyes," he sounded with personal wisdom. Kings Park is lucky to have learned these lessons from a young Irish boy that became everything his mother Molly dreamed in a foreign land that he made his home.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY REIGNS

NEW YORK IS KNOWN as a city of immigrants, intermingling different cultures and people in an often times vertical space. Kings Park's early development mirrors this diversity, as settlers of varying nationalities and religions united in the safety of an accepting town. Protestantism reigned in the early days, and a Presbyterian church was the first established in Nissequogue in the 1670s until two Methodist churches appeared in the late 1700s. These buildings remain standing today, as does the brainchild of Kings Park resident Caroline Platt, a Protestant Church erected on her property in 1892. In memory of her late son, the Lucien Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church was built and moved to its current location on Old Dock Road and Main Street in 1900.

It has long been a prominent corner institution on the western edge of town, and has recently been converted to the Holy Gate Evangelical Church of Long Island. The metamorphosis of this vintage building is a testament to religion in a town that has the ability to adjust to the changing needs of modern life. But Miles Borden reminds us that Kings Park's first religious site was established in 1869, when Dr. William Augustus Muhlenberg created The Society of St. Johnland, and built an Episcopal church on the grounds. Unbeknownst at the time, this Episcopal minister and champion of the poor would create a voice that called others to join him in the development of Kings Park. But that is a tale that will be told later.

The first Catholic church in the area stood south of Smithtown around 1840 and served a smaller number of followers that traveled from all over Long Island to attend mass. Although Kings Park's first Catholic mass was celebrated in a sunroom on the hospital grounds in 1886, St. Joseph's Parish got its start in 1898 on what was then called Kohr Road

(now Church Street). It has been expanded to include former state land in today's thirteen-acre campus. And locals line the streets for mass on Sunday, or special occasions throughout the year. Former Kings Park residents return to this parish to say their wedding vows and celebrate in the backyard of a town that gave them faith in more than just traditional theology. To many people, marking a milestone here solidifies the attachment they feel to the town.

One of the first Jewish synagogues in Suffolk County was built in Kings Park in 1908. It was honored as the oldest standing synagogue in Suffolk County until an unfortunate basement fire destroyed the edifice in 1962. But its legacy was not damaged, and the temple that stands today on 25A was created in 1966 by the Jewish Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Kings Park. The rebuilt temple is a testament to the work of The Patiky family, who emigrated from Poland, and moved to Kings Park in 1897. Jack Patiky was one of the forces behind the reconstruction of the temple, which is no surprise when his grandfather Gershon Patiky and father Elias Patiky helped establish the original Jewish order in town. The Kings Park Jewish Center still stands tall on 25A, attracting members through its strong faith and distinguished history.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Abiding Presence, at the border of Kings Park and Fort Salonga, found its roots in 1968. This religious institution carved its place in town, as it grew in size and strength, particularly in the past two decades. And on the way through town one cannot ignore the unassuming but venerable North Shore Baptist Church of Kings Park. To this day, the congregation volunteers to help the community and work with the schools to improve the town.

From this brief religious history, it is obvious that people living in Kings Park retain a sense of higher order in their lives. Most folks are tied to their respective religions, and houses of worship. But there is not one force that overrides the others and dominates the town. Kings Park has remained true to its multi-ethnic, immigrant roots in a celebration of people that does not require homogeneity.

The arena of acceptance and understanding that enabled different immigrant groups to settle together in Kings Park can be felt pervading the town today. Most people in town attend the celebrations of friends and neighbors at various religious institutions in the area. Life here provides an arena for acceptance that dates back to the town's diverse history, and is memorialized with the locals that originally established this order.

IMMIGRATION AND ITS FUTURE

MANY OLD GENERATION KINGS PARK FAMILIES arrived in the late 1800s after frequenting the area as a vacation resort. The town called St. Johnland in its early days was a reprieve from city life, with arable farmland and access to the outside world through numerous waterways. Lumber was a profitable business and Kings Park's abundance of waterways enabled the shipment of wood by boat to New York City and Connecticut. An influx of British and Northern European settlers first occurred in the 1600s and 1700s. Irish and Scottish immigrants arrived next in droves to join the Kings County Farm and Asylum staff in the early 1900s, and called their relatives over to join them in America.

The massive immigration changed the religious composition of the town and the sound of varying brogues and accents mixed in the fresh air of the country, contributing to the charm. In the 1920s, Generoso Pope led the purchase of 200 acres of land along the Nissequogue River. He named the land San Remo, a tribute to the resort back in his native Italy, and brought the influence of his Brooklyn based newspaper, *Il Progresso*. People received free train trips to Kings Park, or earned small parcels of land by purchasing his magazine subscriptions. The neighborhood flourished as Italians bought multiple subscriptions, obtained numerous plots of land, and built their houses on the combined area.

People of varying cultures were encouraged to work in their respective fields around town, promoting individual business ventures, while benefiting the community-minded whole. The establishment of local hospitals attracted Jewish merchants that did not necessarily work in the hospital, but catered to its other business needs. These new families in town provided dry goods, and services such as water, and electricity. And Jewish settlers, along with other immigrant parents, were instrumental in the creation of a superior education system. This commitment to education began when businesses flourished and people were prosperous, and continues to be cherished today.

EDUCATIONAL EXPANSION

ALTHOUGH KIDS DON'T ALWAYS APPRECIATE the standard of education they receive at an early age, it is a high priority for parents looking to provide a better future for the next generation. The arrival of new families and nationalities brought a

wave of students to town. The history of Kings Park's educational system began with the creation of the New School District Number Ten in Smithtown in 1844. A board of three trustees was elected to protect its goals and select a location for the new one-room schoolhouse. This feat was accomplished through a majority vote that named Cordwood Road, which is now Old Dock Road, as the prime location. But growth in Kings Park soon warranted a larger school with more capabilities.



Tracy Tekverk

Kings Park Heritage Museum

The expansion occurred in 1865 when the local school district was re-named School District Number Five. An area then called Fresh Pond, which is now Fort Salonga, was officially assigned School District Number Four. Both the extension of the Railroad line through Kings Park and the creation of the Kings County Farm and Asylum brought new faces to the district at this time. Although Kings Park was off to a good start providing for its kids, change was imminent with the town growing to new heights in development and population. These factors led to the construction of a new school named *Upper School House* in 1892, while the older institution became *Northside School House*. Both schools were soon sold when the new two-floor school on Old Dock Road opened for its first term in September 1899 to accommodate even more growth in town. This was the first graded elementary school, but the town quickly outgrew its capabilities as well. An extension was needed by 1905, that converted the building to an eight-room school, and yet another classroom was attached in 1913, as kids continued to join the district.

The rural centralization law of 1914 allowed Kings Park to extend its educational system to include a High School, but this could not transpire without financial backing from a source outside the town. This occurred by 1928, after the initial centralization law was amended, and the state promoted the change with increased financial aid. Central School District Number Five, Town of Smithtown, was born from the merger of School Districts Number Four and Five, and set the foundation for the future Kings Park Central School District. Senator George L. Thompson, a force behind many of the positive educational changes in town, acquired land from the state hospital grounds for a new, brick school that was supported by local taxes. And this change in the structure of the school district led to a transformation in the way the new educational system functioned.

A five-person school board replaced the separate school district boards, as the kids themselves prepared for a huge adjustment ahead. High school age locals could finally attend secondary school in town, instead of taking the railroad out to Smithtown or Northport. And students from Commack and Elwood were sent to Kings Park's modernized school for more than a decade. The building now called the Ralph J. Osgood School and Administration Building opened in 1929. It brought new fields of study and extracurricular activities to the district, including a track, athletic fields, and a real auditorium. The integrated school was a much-deserved addition to town, teaching primary students on the first floor, while educating secondary students (grades 9-12) on the second floor. The new school thrived under the expansion of programs such as music and athletics for the children, and open gym and education classes at night for the adults.

The school made its mark by hiring its first reading specialist in 1938, and by creating one of the few special education classes in the county in the same year. Through President F.D.R.'s Public Works Administration and federal funding, another wing was added to the building for new cafeterias, specialty classrooms and kindergarten in 1939. But World War I eliminated most of the tax dollars Kings Park needed to improve its schools and provide for its multiplying population. Construction projects became frequent after the war and Kings Park purchased four new school locations in 1957. Both Indian Head and San Remo Schools were ready for kids by 1957, while Park View opened in 1965, and Fort Salonga in 1968. Ralph J. Osgood was District Principal at the time (now termed Superintendent of Schools) and the district simultaneously worked on a plan for a secondary school site in town. Ready for the start of the school year in 1965, the secondary school was created to house grades 10 through 12.

As the community's kids grew, the need to provide for its middle school children arose quickly and William T. Rogers Junior High School was built on the former elementary school site by 1971. The school was named to honor its first principal after just a few years. But by the mid 1970s the increase in school age children had slowed, and the pre-school census indicated that this would remain a trend for years to come. It was time to dispose of extra school property and perhaps unnecessary schools. Land on Kohr Road that was purchased in the population explosion of the 1950s was sold and Indian Head Elementary School was officially shut down in 1979. Low student enrollment was a statewide phenomenon at this time, with factors such as lower birth rates, women's rights, and an aging population changing the system. In 1988, after a reorganization plan was consulted, adjustments were made that affected school in Kings Park. The High School was extended to include grade nine, the Junior High was converted into a middle school, including grades five and six, and San Remo Elementary school was closed. Although town residents were not thrilled at the prospect of schools closing, the district was unable to resist social and financial forces that warranted the adjustment.

A modern resurgence in birth rates mandated yet another change in the early 1990s to provide for additional kindergarten age students in the community. The RJO building was reorganized to accommodate the influx of kindergarteners and provide an early childhood program. The system works at the present time, although the expansion of school aged children in town is predicted within the next decade. Judging from Kings Park's successful adjustments in the past, residents are confident that the future of the school district is just as promising. And Kings Park continues to receive acclaim for its educational system, another factor that builds faith and draws many families to the town.

Miles Borden, the father of Kings Park's history in print, sums up that, "local history clearly reports that parents, school trustees, teachers, students, district residents and school administrators formed an unwritten alliance to provide the best possible education for the community's young people." Fortunately for residents, "the unwritten alliances of the past have been transcribed during the last two decades (of the 20th century) in clearly written district goals," according to Mr. Borden's book, *History of Kings Park*. Modern advancements and preparation for the future have led to additions such as the district wide computer program that provides computer training to kids throughout their time in school.

The first graduates with extensive computer training finished High School in 1996, with further growth in the program since then. It is

through the continuation of these progressive programs, with additional support and funding for these initiatives, that the system will flourish. The proof is found in the computer skills of current graduates and their preparedness for the outside world, including colleges and universities. Graduation rates and college entrance ratios, along with high scores on Regents Exams and AP tests, keep Kings Park a step above many other local schools. With the work of seasoned administrators such as Dr. Mary De Rose, Superintendent of Schools and Sandra Rosenberg, Assistant Superintendent for Personnel, the passion of a caring community continues to show through the graduation of successful kids.

HOSPITAL GROUNDS AND RAILROAD TRACKS

KINGS PARK'S GROWTH AND EXPANSION CAN be linked to a couple of events that gave the town its own voice from which to sound change. The establishment of Dr. Muhlenberg's Episcopal Society of St. Johnland was an event in 1865 that would benefit the immediate area, as well as other similar societies, for years to come. The exemplary institute was built on a 400-acre farm purchased from the Smith family. This village provided a home for orphans and a place for the elderly, and was an immediate draw to the town. The orphanage and old age home, due to its success, became a model for other organizations and grew to include its own farm buildings, school/recreation facilities, publishing department, church, and post office. Kids from the city came out to Dr. Muhlenberg's village to learn trades and family skills that they could use when they returned home. The facility also promoted interdependence and linked its residents in both living facilities and on the job. Dr. Muhlenberg had previous experience helping the destitute, having created St. Luke's Hospital in New York City and the Fresh Air Fund. It is no wonder that his efforts were frequently imitated and he was honored with the dedication of the college bearing his name. The name St. Johnland soon came to represent far more than even Dr. Muhlenberg imagined, but first came other changes in town.

During the beginning of the twentieth century, the Brooklyn Howard Colored Orphan Asylum made its impression on King Park. Before the Civil War, the facility was located on Brooklyn's Dean Street. After the war, military generals were establishing higher education schools, as mandated by law, and the facility was probably renamed. Howard Orphanage was a tribute to the one-armed general that founded Howard University. The orphanage moved to Indian Head Road in Kings Park after the Brooklyn facility closed in 1911. The orphanage and farm school cared for about two hundred kids, and was yet another institution that diversified the town. Bringing together children in a safe farm

environment, the orphanage contributed to early train traffic until it closed in 1917. Unfortunately, Kings Park was still feeling the effects of segregation when the legendary Booker T. Washington settled in a summer house in Fort Salonga. Washington, a former Virginia slave and founder of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute made his second home for a brief time in the town. Records from 1911 indicate that Mr. Washington attempted to buy land to establish an African American School in the area, but he faced local resistance. His time in the town was short, but the memory of his effort to diversify Kings Park lives on today.



Kings Park Heritage Museum

Steam engine and coal tender returning from a delivery of coal carsto the state hospital power plant in 1951.

In 1871, the united sound of residents struggling to create the private Smithtown-Port Jefferson Railroad Company brought Kings Park to the foreground. The laying of the railroad tracks in town had more impact than any other single event in the history of the community. The line started operation within two years, with the original train stop called *St. Johnland* after Dr. Muhlenberg's society. This was just the beginning of a rail line that would enliven the town in ways unimaginable at the time. The private rail ran separately from the Long Island Railroad Company, which viewed the twenty-mile extension of their line to the east as too costly an endeavor.

By the time the Long Island Railroad gave in and purchased the company in 1891, it had long been involved in the functioning of the line, particularly due to the effort of local leaders that made the railroad take notice. The arrival of the railroad station, in the town that was soon referred to as *St. Johnland*, brought an influx of people and goods never

before possible. New businesses, such as retired New York City firefighter George Cusick's *Brooklyn Hotel*, became the center of town. Eugene F. Keane's *Boulevard Hotel* became a local institution on Main Street, an area east of Indian Head Road then termed "The Flats."

Even Main Street/25A of today had an alternate identity, as the locals referred to it as *Broadway*. A bit further away from the railroad, vacation retreats such as the *Soundview Hotel* at The Bluff and the *Kohr* and *Northshore* hotels developed in the area now belonging to Sunken Meadow State Park. Meanwhile, horse and wagon services developed directly from the emergence of the train traffic that brought vacationers into town through the 1920s. But the summer resort industry slowed with the arrival of the Depression and halted by World War II. The addition of major highways and expansion of state parks on Long Island added to the collapse and the hotels in town soon closed their doors. Examples of the classic transport of the early 1900s can be spotted today in The Kings Park Heritage Museum inside the Ralph J. Osgood Building on Church Street. These antiques were once the only means of carrying visitors from the train to their respective resorts, and they helped the hotels thrive through the 1920s. John Cusick remembers local boys carrying the bags of guests from the train station to the Brooklyn Hotel, while his family's wagons carried visitors to other boardinghouses in town. This location is still visible in Kings Park, but is now a remodeled Chinese Restaurant that marks the spot of the legendary hotel.

Leo Ostebo, director of the Kings Park Heritage Museum speaks openly, "for 125 years the railroad was a lifeline to our community—leading to the hospital and the two orphanages." He continues on, "the railroad brought people here to care for other human beings." And he's not the only one who believes that, "there's a great history of care for human welfare in Kings Park and it's connected to the railroad." This is a history that has been lived by many resident caretakers, nurses, doctors, and administrators from Kings Park's many institutions.

Local hospitals, such as the St. Johnland facility and later, the Kings County Farm and Asylum, quickly became dependent on supplies brought by the railroad. Kings Park's once life-saving waterways almost immediately lost their significance for businesses, although today they have reemerged as viable sources of recreation for boaters and kayakers. Trains could now transport lumber and goods to and from the local hospitals more easily and with guaranteed arrival. A two-hour trip by train from Brooklyn replaced the full day's trek by boat or wagon. In 1877, a single trip from Long Island City to Kings Park cost \$1.10 and saved people the hassles of water and wagon transport of the past.

NAMING KINGS PARK

PRIDE IN A TOWN CALLED KINGS PARK began with a name change that occurred in 1891, as the Long Island Railroad took over the once private rail line. The quickly expanding Kings County Farm and Asylum was developing in a town formerly linked to the Society of St. Johnland. Dr. Muhlenberg's society wanted to make a distinction between their organized village and the town growing exponentially around the railroad, post office, and new Asylum. Mr. Ostebo tells a local legend that suggests an Irishman changed the railroad sign one day to rename the town. In a combined tribute to its Brooklyn founders and the multitude of parks in the area, he created Kings Park. A small park near the Railroad headquarters in Jamaica also bears the name, but it seems more appropriate to picture the local Irishman hanging a makeshift sign in the rail yard. Whether it was the railroad, or the townsfolk themselves that deemed the land Kings Park, it was a new identity to mark the area expanding quickly around the train and the new hospital.

PROTECTING THE GROWING COMMUNITY

ALTHOUGH KINGS PARK NEVER CREATED its own police department, many residents have served in the local organizations that were established through the years. Law enforcement in Kings Park began with the election of one town constable by taxpayers at the annual Town Meeting. The number of constables elected each year began to increase throughout the 1870s, until four were selected in 1879. The constables later took on a greater role in the community as they also became motorcycle officers in the early 1900s. The senior law enforcement officer in the county was the sheriff, until the creation of the New York State Police Department in 1924. Andrew Carlson's Main Street residence stood as trooper headquarters, with the only telephone links to officer's superiors located within the house and the Dowling Brothers Garage across the street. Horses were used for patrol, in all types of weather, until cars were finally provided around the 1930s.

The Town Police Department served local residents with its five officers at this time. Many immigrant officers united in the department with the same community spirit that the local residents had developed. By 1947, the force had grown to nineteen officers with Chief Cyril Donnelly at the head of the department. Officers were no longer required to purchase

their own automobiles, uniforms, and firearms, as they had done in the past. State law required that new appointees were selected from a civil service list. Local resident Miles S. Borden was the first officer selected from the civil service list and raised to the rank of sergeant. It was not until 1960 that the Suffolk County Police Department was formed as the head law enforcement agency for the entire county, abolishing the Smithtown Police Department. Cyril Donnelly became Chief Inspector of the department, the highest officer in the county. Captain Borden commanded the Fourth Precinct, which covered Smithtown. Kings Park has always been a community with strong military, police and fire department contacts. For a history of Kings Park's fire department, from the original Hook and Ladder Company to today's firefighters, see the story on page 224.

CLAIMING KINGS PARK

MANY FAMILIES IN KINGS PARK were instrumental in their work to promote the growth of the town. But certain names stand out because their contributions continue to benefit the community that their families created a century or so ago. The Kelly family name was recorded in history because of Judge John F. Kelly, a resident of Kings Park that made his family proud throughout the early 1900s. A second-generation immigrant from Ireland, his tireless hours on the school board and in his position as Kings Park's postmaster earn him a prominent place in town history. Not only was he elected Justice of the Peace for Smithtown in 1897, but Kelly also served as Suffolk County Sheriff in 1920. Judge Kelly was vital in the creation of the Kings Park Fire District in 1924 and served as Chairman of the Board of Fire Commissions for five years. He promoted the growth of the school district into a centralized entity, and established the John F. Kelly Realty Company in town.

Another key family in Kings Park, the Flynn, took over the Kelly real estate company in 1940, renaming it The John J. Flynn, Inc. Insurance and Real Estate Business. It is now a father-son business run by Larry and John Flynn, still located in the center of town. The arrival of the Flynn family occurred around 1898, when William Flynn found his Irish bride Bridget Carmody at the state hospital. This couple represents many others in town that met and married due to careers at the local Hospital. The Flynn family raised six children whose accomplishments were great, including Joseph who graduated from the State Hospital's school of nursing and helped to create the Fire Department Ambulance Squad in 1957. Joseph's son by the same name established Flynn Bros.,

Inc. in 1967, adding fuel oil delivery, heat and air conditioning services to the town. Bill became an officer in the United States Navy, while John followed his father's lead as Town Justice of the Peace in 1948. John also took over the former Kelly family real estate business in Kings Park. The Flynn name is synonymous with the development of the area, as the family continues to operate their real estate business and reside in the original farmhouse on Church Street.

Fifteen local veterans established the Kings Park's American Legion Post in the summer of 1923. Seven years later, the hall was named the Donald C. Munro American Legion Post #944, in honor of the soldier that lost his life in 1918. James Munro had six sons that all served in the military. Donald Munro was one of these sons that served in the Rainbow Division in France in World War I. He battled on the front lines, and



Tracy Tekverk

Downtown Kings Park has changed little in more than a century.

returned to fight after two awards for bravery, but did not make it home from the war. The Vita family is the epitome of Kings Park's commitment to military service, as seven of Manley and Angelica's sons served in the army, navy and coast guard in World War II. Although the Vita family was one of many that provided support overseas, it was lucky to have all seven brothers return safely after the war. Willie Vita is a founding member of the Nissequogue Post #5796 V.F.W., and remembers hosting the first meeting in his Kings Park home.

George L. Thompson is another name that represents the success of Kings Park as a town and school system. The Thompson general store

was once located on Indian Head Road, housing King's Parks first library, as well as one of the initial post offices in town. Senator Thompson worked in Albany to help Kings Park obtain land from the state to centralize its schools, build the RJO facility, and found the town library, fire department and St. Joseph's Church. He attained funds to expand the state hospital back in the 1920s and worked to create SUNY Farmingdale, then called Farmingdale Agricultural and Technical College. A stained glass window was built in his memory at the Lucien Memorial United Methodist Church, and Thompson Hall at Farmingdale University still honors this inspired Kings Park resident.

The Tanzi family found their way to Kings Park in the massive immigration of Italians due to the advertisements of Brooklyn newspaper *Il Progresso*. Louis and Frances Tanzi were the first in the family to settle in the town, soon followed by Louis's brother Carlo as he entered San Remo. Carlo established the permanence of the Tanzi Hardware and Lumber Company, which served Kings Park until 1995. Carlo's grandson, Tony Tanzi, is currently president of Indian Head Contracting based in the Tanzi Plaza in town. His motto, "Building a better world one job at a time," has been put into effect in Kings Park through a number of projects. His community endeavors include a gazebo built at the high school, work on the children's playground behind the town library and a tribute to his grandmother with the Rachela Tanzi Educational Gallery at the Kings Park Heritage Museum.

THE HOSPITAL COMMUNITY

THROUGH MILES BORDEN'S HISTORY and news clippings from centuries ago, I discovered that Kings County Brooklyn first took interest in a farmland area called St. Johnland in the late 1800s. It was a venture whereby the county purchased almost 900 acres for the establishment of a new patient center. The Kings County Farm and Asylum was created in 1885 as a self-sufficient homestead treating mentally ill patients, while encouraging them to work in businesses on the premises. The farm was fully functional and housed both the poor and insane from its early beginnings. Townspeople were not originally comfortable with the establishment of this facility in their newfound home, but the dissent quieted as the hospital grew and expanded, bringing with it new job opportunities and economic fuel for the area. The Kings County Farm and Asylum was modeled in structure after the nearby St. Johnland facility and provided a space for those marked *different* to put their various skills to good use on a busy farm, within a community setting. In 1900 the state took over and renamed it the Long Island State Hospital. The name was changed again in 1905 to Kings

Park State Hospital, until the facility was finally deemed the Kings Park Psychiatric Center in later years. Despite name changes on the sign, the hospital retained its identity and created economic stability in town throughout its existence.

Through programs such as the nursing school and career opportunities in its medical facilities, maintenance department, administration, cafeteria, bakery, and farm, the hospital provided jobs in almost every field. Local settlers enjoyed the job security of the hospital and its contribution to the growth of individuals, as well as the town. They encouraged their friends and family to join them in Kings Park, where jobs were plentiful. At its peak in the 1950s, the hospital held 10,000



Tracy Tekverk

The docks and waters of Long Island Sound and the Nissequogue River are a recreational resource for Kings Park.

patients on over 500 acres overlooking the Nissequogue River. The hospital functioned as its own community inside the borders of Kings Park, a world that both utilized the resources of the town and provided jobs and services to the area. But this facility could not subsist forever, and its downfall was foreshadowed when the methods for dealing with psychiatric patients changed in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Patient enrollment was declining and the state was suffering economic loss for the once vibrant hospital.

The state began to shift the responsibility of the mentally ill to local governments, downsizing its facilities as many patients entered independent living facilities. Kings Park Psychiatric Center, the oldest state run hospital of its kind, closed in 1996, eliminating approximately three hundred jobs with the shutting of its doors. The facility that began

as three wooden houses, with about 50 patients, had grown to more than 150 structures, on over 800 acres. The once self-sufficient community established there was forced to move on, in desperate search of alternative jobs and housing.

Governor George Pataki dedicated The Nissequogue River State Park on former state hospital land in 1999. He designated over 150 acres as parkland, and linked the park to Long Island's GreenBelt hiking trail. The facilities were expanded to include boating and kayaking, bird-watching, and fishing. A visitor center and conference room were also added to the park, the entrance to which can be reached from inside the hospital grounds, or down St. Johnland Road. The state set its agenda when this area was salvaged for the park. An agreement was made to sell 370 acres of former hospital grounds for future use, with a restricted 95 acres allotted for construction. The bidding for the land, now in need of major asbestos cleanup and building demolition, began in 2000. By 2002, the price had dropped and the highest bids were reviewed in consideration of the debt accrued on the land by the state. The environmental cleanup that is estimated to cost over \$30 million is a deterrent to some small bidders, but the potential of the land far outweighs such considerations.

Town involvement is a major factor in the sale and development of the hundreds of acres that once dominated the town. The Kings Park community has turned out at Chamber of Commerce meetings, town events and recent charrettes to voice the opinion of a town seeking a positive change for the area. Local leaders have pointed out that Kings Park wants diversity and growth, without an overwhelming amount of construction. State mental health offices, a private living facility and a cemetery use a minute portion of the land at the moment. But Kings Park is not willing to settle for a deal, on hundreds of acres, that it will regret in the future. Serious consideration was given to a recent bid that proposed houses and apartments, with some business growth, on the former hospital grounds.

Yet Kings Park officials and residents refuse to budge on the agreement created to protect a large portion of the land as open space. Locals are realistic about the consequences of development on so many acres. A development plan that would create a mini city of high-density housing on the land would tax the education system, and potentially cause major environmental concerns. An overabundance of business growth on the land would compete with those already located in town and cause a traffic disaster if not properly designed. The town is seeking a balance that would renew the area, relieving some of the high taxes paid by locals, while maintaining its recreational value. As of yet this has not

been accomplished and the search continues for an acceptable bid. Kings Park is actively protecting the land throughout each step of the process, until the situation feels right. Although the hospital grounds are fairly quiet today, the Kings Park Hike and Bike Trail spans the lane from Flynn Road to 25A. For now, this trail and the Nissequogue Park represent acceptable uses of the former state hospital land until Kings Park residents approve an expansion bid.

THE FUTURE OF KINGS PARK

KINGS PARK BOASTS AN ABUNDANCE of parks, beaches and recreation areas. From its creation in 1928, to its expansion today, The Alfred E. Smith/Sunken Meadow State Park draws people to town. The beach provides a widespread view of Long Island's shore, both east and west, and refreshes visitors as they swim, bike, run, and hike throughout the park. The footbridge offers a view of the salt marsh and tidal river, while picnic areas, playgrounds, golf facilities and protected environmental science sites complete the grounds. School science classes study the wildlife areas, while local Cross Country teams conquer the notorious *Cardiac Hill*. On a summer day, the young and old alike pass each other on the remodeled boardwalk and hiking trails, which keep all visitors young at heart. Pride in this land and preservation of its recreational value comes with a deep respect for the past and definite goals to protect its future.

Callahan's Town Park and Beach, Smithtown Landing Pool and Golf Course, Nissequogue State Park, the Kings Park Bluff, and numerous fields for baseball, soccer, and other sports fill the town with the sound of laughter from both children and adults. The St. Johnland Nursing Center, elderly living facilities, and a daycare also make their presence known on the back roads to the Kings Park Bluff. The dock of the Bluff is fully functional for boating and fishing, and a path leads to Long Island's scenic Greenbelt Trail. The Bluff no longer includes the hotels that once reigned, but it's still a popular spot for meals at the Old Dock Inn, or visits with friends.

Packed with beaches and parks, Kings Park has been a vacation area since its start as St. Johnland in the late 1800's. Lucky for its residents, it still boasts this abundance of outdoor recreation space. But the town possesses a feature more distinctive than its shorelines and playgrounds. It is a reflection of the people in Kings Park. Town residents have stories of meeting one another in their travels around the world. Kings Park's family-oriented community seems to spread itself across the United States and across the globe, creating networks of friendly faces wherever

residents go. Kings Park also draws its former students back to town after time away for college and careers. Kings Park kids tend to grow up and return to the town they call home to start families. This is further proof that the town is unlike most other places as its welcoming spirit brings people back to the area.

The local force that links businesses and community members is the Kings Park Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber supports the town and creates community events such as Kings Park Day. Occurring annually, the Saturday before Father's Day, this event showcases carnival rides in



Tracy Tekverk

The old Kings Park Psychiatric Hospital grounds remain a vital resource for the town—this soccer pitch at the foot of a majestic but abandoned building brings serves families all season long.

town and a safe path down Main Street for pedestrians. It is a practically free day of fun and activities for local families that come out to enjoy the fair atmosphere. A bike race always starts off the morning, with raffles, face painting and crafts to round out the afternoon. By the time traffic is allowed back onto Main Street, local kids are full of free snacks and covered with stickers, as are many of their parents and neighbors. President Charles Gardner leads the Chamber of Commerce, which sponsors a scholarship program for exceptional Kings Park High School graduates and works extensively with the schools. Superintendent of Schools Dr. Mary DeRose, recently professed at a Chamber meeting, "it could not be a better time for the school and business community to work together." The development of The Kings Park Heritage Museum, under the direction of former high school teacher Leo Ostebo, reflects this spirit. The Museum promotes town history, preserves artifacts and encourages volunteer work. It brings local literature such as Miles Borden's book to

school children and encourages programs that uncover the richness of Kings Park, past and present.

Amidst rumors and proposals, plans of preserving land and developing dilapidated buildings, Kings Park keeps adjusting. What does this mean for a town that is still recognizable by the layout of its original Main Street? Kings Park has pride in its origins, and respect for its past, but its people, like its train, are moving forward. One crucial factor concerning the development of the former hospital grounds is a step towards change that does not erase the town's past. Locals appeared at recent charrettes representing community action organizations, businesses, families, and themselves. It is a sure sign that the people of Kings Park remain involved in the town that has gotten them this far. And residents refuse to remain quiet as the town's future stands before them. Although this involvement makes the decision process regarding hundreds of acres of land slightly more complicated, it ensures that the community is informed. It also highlights Kings Park as a caring town with high ideals and outspoken local leaders. Without these traits, the model school district, beautiful environmental site and strong community that exist today would never have developed. So if the future seems unsure, listen closely to the whisper between the past and the present; there you'll find the heart of Kings Park, its residents and the promise of a successful future founded in the same determination that built this town.

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RACHEL WALLACK graduated from Binghamton University and developed her writing as a Contributing Editor for a magazine in Boston and as a freelance writer. She has published poetry and articles in a variety of publications and continues to work in the field. A recent move has brought her back to her New York roots and the inspiration that made her a writer.

"I took a trip back to childhood to write this feature about my hometown. The personal interviews and research reaffirmed the positive outlook that I maintained after growing up in Kings Park. I have Miles B. Borden and his expert research to thank for much of the history noted in this piece. I pay tribute to Mr. Borden and his family of model Kings Park citizens and fire department volunteers with this feature on our town. I am also thankful for the resources of the Kings Park Heritage Museum and the background it provided for my research. These histories recorded in print ensure a future for the memories of Kings Park, as they live on to remind us of the lives fostered here."

TRACY TEKVERK photographed the front cover for *Night Train* and several pictures for the Sponsors' Section article. She studied fine art and commercial photography at Rochester Institute of Technology on a Phi Beta Kappa academic scholarship, and she was an architectural photographer for a client list including MGM and Gensler Architects. Her nature photography has appeared in calendars and she has shot for *Field & Stream*; her portrait portfolio includes individuals, families and weddings. She and her husband are both fourth-generation Kings Park residents. Her photography career took her briefly from Kings Park, but she returned to marry and raise a family.

"I liked the idea of shooting the bricked-up door to the Kings Park State Psychiatric Center. This particular shot captures the tension confronting our town of late: the richness of Kings Park's history along with the dilemma of what to do with the old hospital. The building is such a Kings Park landmark, yet it's unused, mostly a place teenagers go on a dare. I think the cover photo reminds us where we've come from, and that its destruction or rebirth will play a large role in what Kings Park becomes in the future."