

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.