

PATCHOGUE:

A Brief History



Patchogue-Medford Library

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The Earliest Years

The name Patchogue is derived from the Algonquin language, “Pochaug” meaning “a turning place” or “where two streams separate.” For many thousands of years the area that later became Patchogue was inhabited by Native American Indians. Precisely when they arrived and who its first discoverer was is unknown. By the time of European contact in the Late Woodland Era, Native Americans were living in year-round villages, making their own wigwams or longhouses, clothing, boats, tools, weapons, toys, money and decorated pottery. The Indians had long established trails and wide-ranging trade networks on Long Island and to the north and west. They conducted fishing, shellfishing, hunting and varied horticulture and agriculture. They grew, prepared and stored their own food and were familiar with the pharmaceutical properties of a large variety of native plants. They had customs, ceremonies and spiritual life, as well as political and diplomatic skills. They were interrelated across the Island and further afield, and spoke an Algonquian dialect that Thomas Jefferson would one day record, and later lose.

Europe took its time in arriving. In 1494, Spain through the Treaty of Tordesillas received the right to claim half the world, including Patchogue. Portuguese fishermen and whalers may have wandered from the Grand Banks of Newfoundland to the general area shortly thereafter. Giovanni da Verrazano sailed by and viewed the coast for France in 1524. By 1607, the English believed Patchogue belonged to the Virginia Company by charter. Next came Henry Hudson (1609) in the *Halve Maen* for the Dutch, who were the first Europeans to physically settle Long Island. Even though Dutch settlement was far to the west, the Dutch soon lay claim to all of Long Island including Patchogue. In 1620, northern Virginia was handed over to England’s Plymouth Colony, Patchogue included. Charles I of England gave Lord Stirling, poet and royal favorite, title to Long Island in 1635. Stirling sold it in 1659 to 5 speculators who traveled to Southold: Edward Howell, Daniel Howe, John Thomas, Edward Farrington and Matthew Sunderland. Shortly after New England’s victory in the Pequot War in 1639, the expanding New England colonies began to settle easternmost Long Island. In 1655 the first settlement, Setauket, was founded in what is known today as Brookhaven Town.

Patchogue (Village in the Wilderness)

On June 10, 1664, Tobaccus, an Unkechaug Sachem, sold nine necks (peninsulas) of land in what is today's Patchogue, Blue Point and East Patchogue to Governor John Winthrop, Jr. of Connecticut Colony. The land stretched from these nine necks along the Great South Bay, northward to the center of Long Island and remained undeveloped by European settlers for decades. When John Winthrop, Jr. died, his son, who had defeated the Dutch at the "Battle" of Southold in 1674, confirmed the deed in 1680 with Governor Andros of New York Colony, in return for which, the area (soon called the "Winthrop Patent") officially became part of New York Province.

The two easternmost necks of land were eventually sold to John Brewster and Thomas Strong in 1749 and today are part of East Patchogue. The other seven necks of land in Blue Point and Patchogue were sold to Humphrey Avery of Preston, Connecticut in 1752 for £2,599. In 1758, Avery, in serious financial straits, asked for and received approval from the Governor and Council of New York Province to hold a lottery. The land was divided into 36 unequal lots and 8,000 lottery tickets were issued at 30 shillings each. The lottery was such a success that Avery was able to repurchase four of the lots, including Lot # 4, which included the land where today's village center stands. In 1773, the former Winthrop Patent area, including Patchogue, became part of Brookhaven Town by act of the New York provincial legislature.

Milltown on the Waterfront

Patchogue's lakes, rivers and waterfront have always played a critical role in its history. Industry in Patchogue began with mills built along its lakes and rivers. In 1750, before the Avery lottery, Patchogue's first mill on the Patchogue River ground local corn and wheat. Later, Tuttle's Creek, Patchogue Lake, and East Lake (on Swan Creek) were dammed to create water power for other mills. These mills produced paper, twine, cloth, wool, carpet, lumber, leather and iron products. By 1880, workers at the Patchogue-Plymouth Lace Mill were making lace curtains, tablecloths and handkerchiefs, and a short time later the village earned the nickname, "Milltown." During World War II, the Lace Mill produced camouflage netting, waterproof covers, and parachutes for the war effort. The Lace Mill was an impressive brick factory complex seen as you entered the village from the west. It was ravaged by fire in the 1970's and torn down in the 1990's. Along with E. Bailey and Sons lumberyards and fleet, it was one of the region's largest employers and a haven of employment for many new immigrants.

In 1887, gristmill owner E.H. Terry bought 2 electric turbines, running his Patchogue Lake mill by day and providing the village's first electricity by night. A mob of villagers,

angry that the unfamiliar electric arc frightened their horses and convinced that this strange form of energy would set the town ablaze, went to lynch Terry, who was able to dissuade them. The following year, Terry was a founder and prominent officer of the Patchogue Electric Light Company. Patchogue was one of fewer than 300 communities in the U.S. to have electric lighting. Four years earlier in 1883, another mob tried to lynch E.S. Peck, the CEO of Patchogue and Suffolk County Bank when it failed. He soon attempted suicide, but was fortunately intercepted by J.J. Craven (Jefferson Davis' prison doctor, author and inventor) earning Peck village sympathy, though Peck and his wife would leave town 4 months later in utter poverty.

Lumber & Shipbuilding, Oysters & Clams

The Patchogue River was dredged in 1875 and again in 1897 to become the only deep-water port on Long Island's South Shore. Patchogue was an official United States port of entry from 1875 until 1922. The huge Bailey lumberyards thrived near the river's head for many decades. The Patchogue River has been home to numerous boat and shipbuilding yards. The most prominent was Gil Smith's boatyard whose sleek, wooden catboats were among the worlds finest, repeatedly winning international competitions off the Long Island coast between 1876 -1938. Some of his models and boat plans now grace the Smithsonian Institution and Long Island Maritime Museum. In the days when boats and ships were the most efficient means of transportation, Patchogue shipbuilders made four hundred ton schooners, sloops, barges and boats as small as dories. Ice boats and ice scooters were built to travel across the treacherous winter ice between Fire Island's U.S. Life Saving Service Station and the village. Ice boat and ice scooter races became popular and still occasionally occur today.

Patchogue's location on the Great South Bay allowed many Patchoguers to make their living fishing and shellfishing, contributing to its growth. During the Revolutionary War, several battles were fought over oyster, fish, cordwood and salt hay hauls. By the 1850's, the clamming industry supplied thousands of shucked and boiled clams to New York City. Menhaden (bunker) were processed in a factory on Swan River producing fish oil and fertilizer. The oyster industry employed 350 people in 1850 and reached its peak in the production and shipping of oysters in 1895. Famous Blue Point oysters were canned and shipped from Patchogue all over the world. In 1980, Great South Bay yielded 60% of the nation's hard-shelled clams, with over 31 million pounds of fish and shellfish harvested. Patchogue baymen had no small share in this.

The Railroad & Growth

Along with the mill and fishing industries, Patchogue grew as a commercial and shopping hub for central and eastern Long Island. Various support industries opened to serve businesses and the expanding hotel industry after the 1869 arrival of the southern spur of the Long Island Railroad. In addition to large hotels, guest cottages and boarding houses, Patchogue was filled with general stores, wheelwrights, bakeries, pharmacies, a bank, liveries, stationer shops and an insurance agency. Two department stores, Swezey & Newins and Hammond-Mills stood on the Four Corners. Schools were consolidated, fire companies established, and a library was built. *The Patchogue Advance's* advertisements from 1890 - 1930 chronicle businesses catering to men's and women's apparel, patent medicines, household items and the latest items from New York City. After the turn of the century, transportation evolved from horse driven buggies and wagons to automobiles and trucks. Livery stables and blacksmiths were replaced by businesses servicing automobiles as they grew in popularity. A monorail ran from Bayport to Hagerman for a time. The Suffolk Traction Company's trolley ran from Patchogue to Holtsville in the 1910's and along Main Street and down South Ocean Avenue to the bay.

People

The citizenry of Patchogue were engaged in many organizations, including local chapters of the American Legion, Foresters of America, Knights of Columbus and Sorosis. The newspapers were filled with announcements of clubs, charitable and religious meetings and social get-togethers. Soon influential people were vacationing in the village and coming to live here. Local, state and national association conferences and meetings in Patchogue were also advertised in the local papers.

The literary and political crowd has a long history in Patchogue. "The Willows" on West Main Street was owned by Seba Smith (editor and lampooner of the Andrew Jackson administration) and Elizabeth Oakes-Smith from 1860 – 1869. Elizabeth Oakes-Smith was an author, poet and lecturer who ran a fashionable literary salon in New York City. She was an abolitionist and an early women's suffragist, who challenged Susan B. Anthony for national leadership of the suffragist movement and ran for Vice-President and President of the United States on the women's rights ticket.

President George Washington had lunch at Hart's Tavern in Patchogue on April 22, 1790. After President Washington passed through Patchogue on his whirlwind tour of Long Island, he stopped in Setauket at the first Roe's Tavern to likely thank one of his spies, Austin Roe. Seven years later Austin Roe moved to Patchogue and opened what later became Roe's Hotel. In the 1820's to the 1840's Daniel Webster stayed overnight

occasionally in Patchogue (he vacationed and fished in Bellport and Brookhaven Hamlet), and once made a public speech in Patchogue that backfired. In 1898, Theodore Roosevelt had better luck with the crowd gathered to hear him in Patchogue on a whistle-stop gubernatorial campaign.

The death of the literati Margaret Fuller on the shipwreck *Elizabeth* brought Henry David Thoreau on Ralph W. Emerson's orders to Patchogue in 1850. Some locals stole shipwrecked goods and survivors clothing, earning grand jury appearances in New York City.

Hotels & The Resort Industry

The arrival of the railroad in April 1869 revolutionized travel and commerce to and from Patchogue. In the earlier years of the twentieth century, special rates and promotional efforts were made by LIRR publicity agents like Medford's Hal and Edith Fullerton. Long Island was touted as bucolic countryside with many miles of woods, field and shore for hunting, fishing and farming and also an escape from the city's sweltering summer heat. Roe's Hotel on Main Street was open year-round and offered private hunting grounds for its guests in the 1880's. Large resort hotels fronted Great South Bay, while others lined Main Street and Ocean Avenue. The Smith sisters ("Four Sisters") became wealthy from their millinery business in New York City and returned to Patchogue. Augusta Smith owned the Ocean Avenue Hotel at the foot of Ocean Avenue. Her sister Ruth took over the Smithport Hotel from their father and built the Mascot II (Rogers) Hotel. The hotels attracted visitors from Brooklyn and other parts of metropolitan New York. The comings and goings of the summer set, their parties, concerts, masquerade balls and hops, bridge and euchre parties, tennis, croquet, sailing and golf tournaments, sailing excursions and midnight cruises across the Great South Bay were all reported in the *New York Times* and *Brooklyn Eagle*. Local baymen converted their fishing boats to take summer vacationers to Fire Island for swimming parties, clam-bakes and picnics. There was such a demand on Long Island for summer rooms that local people converted their homes to boarding houses, constructed guest cottages and rented rooms in their farmhouses. With all these new structures, the fire department expanded and received training and equipment.

The resort industry spurred the local entertainment industry. Lyceums and theaters featured vaudeville shows, concerts, plays, formal dances, and fundraising events. In 1893, the village incorporated, instituting a municipal government. After a short-lived roller skating craze in the 1880's, a bicycle craze overtook the nation, including Patchogue. In the 1890's, one of Long Island's bicycle racing headquarters was at Roe's Hotel on Main Street, and a local racing association grew up there. In summer, baseball games, swimming, fishing, boating, and sailing were popular, as were skating and iceboat and ice scooter racing in winter on the river, creeks and Great South Bay.

The Two Great Wars

During World War I, the Patchogue area contributed quite a number of soldiers, sailors and officers to the war effort. On the home front, soldiers seeking release from grueling manual labor and basic training at Camp Upton (now Brookhaven National Lab) came to Patchogue in overwhelming numbers and proceeded to behave as soldiers on leave. In 1918, all soldiers were banned from Patchogue, enforced by a cavalry provost guard at the edge of town, until such time as the village and town fathers reformed the bars and red light district. The ban was lifted later that year.

The Twenties began the golden age of the movies. Appearances by stars of the caliber of Gloria Swanson and Mary Pickford to launch local openings of their movies were not uncommon in Patchogue. Movie palaces proliferated in the village and one of them, the Patchogue Theater, has recently been restored to its former elegance.

The heyday of the grand resorts on Long Island was fading by World War I and dealt blows by a growing automobile industry (allowing vacations in places other than those easily accessible by railroad), and finally, the Great Depression. Today, little remains of the enormous hotels that covered the shores and villages of Long Island.

The Roaring Twenties saw some other changes. During Prohibition, local baymen and fishermen, intimate with the coastline and its rivers and bays, were able to supplement their incomes by becoming rumrunners, smuggling lucrative illegal liquor ashore from ships moored in the international waters of Rum Row (in the Atlantic, just beyond the 3-mile U.S. territorial limit), past the Coast Guard and shore police agencies, to strategically located waiting cars and trucks. Some of the liquor was taken to an alcohol cutting factory in East Patchogue, while some was taken to safe houses and barns. Then the liquor found its way to speak-easies (some in Patchogue Village), private homes, and mansions of those who could afford it, notably those of Long Island's Gold Coast. Many locals were recipients of bottles packed in a variety of ways, tossed overboard to evade detection, which floated to shore. One attempted Patchogue dockside police raid ended in a chaotic nighttime dispersal of the smugglers, yielding some arrests, but no liquor, therefore no prosecutions. On Long Island, the temperance-oriented, politically well-connected Ku Klux Klan (who were run out of town during one local parade) frequently aided Coast Guard shore patrols and the FBI in intercepting rumrunners, while the rumrunners were abetted by organized crime. Local boatbuilders sold to both sides. With repeal of Prohibition, these activities quickly "dried up."

World War II saw another influx of troops on leave, this time with less stern consequences. A local USO opened to entertain them. A circular photograph of a large number of community members taken at the Four Corners and a publication called *A Magic Carpet Furlough* were sent to Patchoguers on duty abroad.

Patchogue's Growth

Natural resources enabled Patchogue to grow from an agrarian and fishing economy to a mill town with shipbuilding and seafood industries. The transportation revolution created by the railroad's arrival in 1869 allowed hotels and boarding houses to flourish while theaters, restaurants and entertainment venues developed. Expansion of businesses servicing these industries continued to drive Patchogue's growth. The 19th century advent of mass manufacturing in clothing, machinery and every good imaginable greatly expanded wholesale and retail markets. Patchogue flourished as a regional shopping district as Suffolk County's farmland and woods gradually became suburban in the twentieth century.

Modern Times

Patchogue's current resurgence is due to determined Village officials, businesses and organizations. The Chamber of Commerce is one of the largest in New York State and one of the most active, supporting over 300 businesses. Patchogue hosts 'Alive After Five' and the Great South Bay Music Festival in the summer months. Festivals, parades and events like breakfast crawls are showcased in the spring and fall. The Village has its own fireworks display to celebrate the New Year. Meals, tastings and events at Patchogue's more than thirty restaurants offer a wealth of menus and dining options, making Patchogue a food lover's paradise.

Mark Rothenberg & Carrie Locke
Reference and Adult Services Department