

**LONG ISLAND. READ
BEFORE THE LONG ISLAND
HISTORICAL SOCIETY,
NOVEMBER 5, 1863**

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Long Island. Read before the Long Island Historical Society, November 5, 1863 by W. Alfred Jones

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LONG ISLAND.

It may seem almost an act of presumption to attempt an historical sketch, much less a detailed account, of Long Island, topographical and statistical, within the ordinary limits of a lecture,—as a full consideration of any one of the numerous topics of this paper would exhaust the time and patience of the most complaisant audience. Anything like copiousness of detail or thoroughness of treatment is, consequently, quite out of the question. Our utmost endeavor will be to aim at presenting a very brief, very rapid, and yet tolerably comprehensive, sketch of the notabilia, men and things, of Long Island,—a portion of the Empire State far too little known, except to native Long-Islanders, residents of long-standing, or those who, from business connections, social ties, or pleasure excursions, have become somewhat acquainted with her varied resources and manifold attractions.

It is, moreover, with no affectation of modesty, that we undertake this task (a labor of love though it be), when we reflect on our avowed incompetence, compared with certain gentlemen here present, who, from birth, ampler information, and the nature of their researches, are far better fitted to treat this subject, and yet whose favorable suffrages we should be most anxious to gain. Since no one has, however, thought it expedient to present such a mere summary as we propose to give—unwilling, perhaps, to be at the pains to condense within

a sketch, what might be so much more attractively amplified into a volume—we beg the forbearance, and deprecate in advance the criticism, of any student, historical or antiquarian, who might complain of the very superficial and discursive nature of this essay.

Though a native New-Yorker, yet, as the descendant of Long-Islanders, we take a special pride and interest in the Island, and all that relates to it. On this ground, too, we seem to feel a certain claim on your kindness, and confess a desire to connect our name, again, with the home of our fathers.

The historical importance of Long Island has never been overrated. Next to the city of New York, it is the oldest portion of the State that had been visited and settled by Dutch and English. Previous to the Revolution, Long Island constituted the oldest and most important part of the colony. A century ago the population of Long Island (says Prime) was more than that of the city of New York, and more than one-third that of the province. At the commencement of this century, Long Island was still a most important part of the State.

To the student of political history, the antiquary, the humorist, the sportsman, the invalid, and the traveler for pleasure, Long Island holds out many and various attractions.

Her history, colonial and revolutionary; the Indian tribes (her original proprietors); the settlement of her towns; their quaint nomenclature; her old churches and houses; the manorial grants of the Suffolk and Queens County patentees; the quaint English reminiscences of the east end, and the picturesque relics of the Dutch, in the western; the romantic hardships of the whale fishery, and the bold race of men it nurtures—are all topics of interest.

The celebrated men, too, who first drew breath in this

avored region, and those who in later life retired here to enjoy a calm and happy old age, are worthy of being recorded.

We shall attempt, concisely enough, to touch upon all these points,—for we can do little more,—and we must again declare that the present paper is but introductory to the historical course that will follow, and is intended to bear the same relation to it, as a preface to the volume of history.

On the arrival of the European colonists, thirteen tribes of native Indians were found in possession of the Island. At present a mere handful of half-breeds remain (more negro than Indian) of the once powerful and predominant Montauks, and but a meagre remnant of the Shinnecock tribe, settled on a Government reservation at Shinnecock. The only skirmish of any consequence between the Indians and the white inhabitants occurred 1653, at Fort Neck (the seat of the Floyd Jones family), the famous Captain John Underhill being the victor.

The colonial history of Long Island to the period of the Revolution is occupied (in its earlier records) with Indian difficulties; afterwards with civil protests of the Dutch against the Duke of York's government; with party politics and local disputes. On the establishment of the English colonial dominion on Long Island, the Duke's laws (which tradition declares to have been drawn up by no less a personage than Lord Chancellor Clarendon, the great historian) were promulgated for the government of the province, and became the established code. The Dutch had previously governed the western end for nearly half a century.

During the era of the Revolution—throughout almost the entire war—the Island was held by the British. It contained many patriotic citizens, however, who secretly gave "material aid" to their fellow-countrymen, in nearly its whole extent; and on its soil at least one important action was fought—the

Battle of Long Island, at Gowanus—from which the masterly retreat to New York was conducted with such signal success.

The principal towns on Long Island were settled almost contemporaneously by the Dutch and English, at either end of the Island, about the middle of the seventeenth century. Southold was the first town settled on Long Island—1640. Memorials of the original colonists are to be found in the very few old houses and churches still remaining—antiquarian relics of that early period.

The principal of these (so far as we can learn) are the Cortelyou house at Gowanus—the headquarters of Lord Stirling at the Battle of Long Island; the old stone house at New Utrecht, in which General Woodhull died; the Bowne house at Flushing; the Young's place at Southold; the old stone cottage at Ravenswood; and the Fort Neck mansion, built by Judge Thomas Jones, the loyalist, just previous to the Revolution.

In Flatbush and in Brooklyn were standing, at the commencement of the present century, and even later, houses of equal or greater antiquity, not to omit the old brick house built by Major Thomas Jones, at Massapequa, 1696, and removed 1835,—the property, at that time, of Hon. David S. Jones. At South Hampton and at East Hampton several very old houses are yet standing.

A few quite ancient houses of worship are still to be found. The Presbyterian meeting-house at East Hampton; the Caroline Church at Setauket (the oldest Episcopal church on Long Island); and the Quaker meeting-house at Flushing—the oldest house of worship on Long Island, built 1690—are the principal.

The Long Island Historical Library is still limited. Its history and antiquities have, to be sure, been explored and discussed, compiled and commented upon, but not as they should be. A brief yet comprehensive, a classical but yet

familiar, narrative remains to be written. Thompson's volumes contain the material for a history, and disclose the sources for further research; but they do not present history in the high and strict sense. They include an ample store of facts, not philosophically digested, nor yet skillfully arranged. The compiler, as the historian always modestly calls himself, transferred too many documents and records, valuable as evidence, or illustrative of the text, but burthensome to the reader. He is, perhaps, too, in his biographical sketches, which form a sort of Long Island family history (by far the most interesting portion of his work to all interested in the details), too much of a genealogist, and not enough of a biographer. With these obvious defects (and notwithstanding other defects of style and manner), full of matter as it undoubtedly is, and the work of an honorable man and zealous inquirer, it is thus far the best—the accredited history of Long Island.

Wood's History of the settlement of the towns of Long Island, and Furman's Notes on Brooklyn, both of which tracts preceded it, are truly valuable sketches, careful in research and clear in style. Dr. Strong's History of Flatbush, Mr. Riker's History of Newtown, Judge Benson's Memoranda, and occasional historical sermons, afford useful material for local history.

The earliest printed account of Long Island is to be found in Denton's Description of New York, of which Long Island was then the part best known and most compactly peopled, after the Island of Manhattan itself. It has been reprinted by Gowans, the well-known bibliopole of New York City, with interesting notes by Judge Furman. It is a quaint and curious description of the city and the Island, very literal and very bald as to style, written in a vein of remarkable naivete. The author of this pamphlet of twenty pages, published in 1670,