

## A Brief History of Northport and Environs



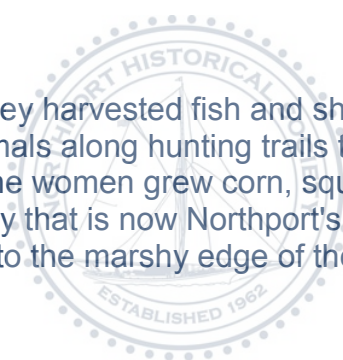
*Northport Harbor, 1898*

### Capsule History

- 1656** English settlers purchase land from Matinnecock Indians and establish farms
- 1700** Called Great Cow Harbor, a likely reference to the cows pastured at harbor's mouth
- 1781** Elijah Churchill, wounded at Battle of Fort Salongo, awarded first purple heart by Gen. Washington
- 1798** Pres. John Adams authorizes construction of Eatons Neck Lighthouse
- 1802** Public wharf replaces Bryant's Landing to facilitate commerce
- 1824** Northport House hotel established near the dock
- 1837** The name Northport becomes official in Town of Huntington records
- 1840** Shipbuilding begins in earnest and becomes first major industry
- 1867** Long Island Rail Road reaches Northport
- 1884** Sand mining begins at West Beach on Eatons Neck
- 1888** Edward Thompson Co. publishes first encyclopedia of American and English law
- 1894** Northport becomes first incorporated village in Town of Huntington
- 1895** Northport Electric Light Co. powers first electric lights
- 1902** Electric trolley replaces horse-drawn stage to railroad station
- 1928** Village Park created on site of old shipyards

### Indians

When Europeans first discovered Long Island, the Matinnecock Indians were living in the verdant hills around Northport. They had migrated earlier to western Long Island as a result of



conflicts with surrounding tribes. They harvested fish and shellfish in the clear waters of Northport Bay and stalked wild animals along hunting trails that crisscrossed Eatons Neck, Crabmeadow, and Fort Salonga. The women grew corn, squash and beans in the fertile fields. They camped along the valley that is now Northport's Main Street, where an abundant stream of fresh water flowed down to the marshy edge of the harbor.

## Dutch Sailors

The first known white men to see Northport Harbor were Dutch sailors exploring Long Island Sound. In 1650 they sailed past the rocks at Eatons Neck and entered the quiet waters of the bays. From the high bluffs overlooking the harbor, the Matinnecocks and their chief, Asharoken, must have been watching as the huge "winged canoes" furled their sails and dropped anchor.

## Eatons Neck

In 1646 Chief Asharoken sold the land known today as Eatons Neck to Theophilus Eaton, the governor of Connecticut. As Governor Eaton continued to live in Connecticut, Eatons Neck remained uninhabited by white men.

## Northport

In 1656 Chief Asharoken sold the area around what is now Northport to three representatives of Huntington settlers. Included in the sale was the land between Northport Harbor and Smithtown Harbor, south to the present Jericho Turnpike and north to Long Island Sound. The purchase price was 2 coats, 4 shirts, 11 ounces of gunpowder and 7 quarts of liquor.

## Settlers

The first settlers came from Huntington. They got along peacefully with the Indians as land was cleared for farms and trees were cut for buildings and cordwood. The early settlers used the Indians' path to the harbor when they fished, and they followed their hunting trails through the woods. One of the early settlers, Bryant Skidmore, built a house in 1761 that still stands at 529 Main Street. This house is close to the original center of the community, then called Red Hook (changed to Vernon Valley in 1820), at the five-corner junction of Main Street, Fort Salonga Road (Route 25A), Waterside Road and Vernon Valley Road.



*Oldest House, built 1761*

## Revolutionary War

Farming in outlying areas was hard and lonely, and not many settlers came. By the time of the Revolutionary War in 1776, over 100 years after Chief Asharoken had sold the land, only 31 families had settled in and around Red Hook, including the settlements at Cow Harbor, Crabmeadow and Fresh Pond.

During the war British troops occupied all of Long Island. They built a fort at the edge of the Sound near the border between Huntington and Smithtown and named it after the fort's contractor, George Slongo. Fort Slongo had a force of 80 to 140 men who frequently raided neighboring farms, seizing food and making off with cattle. On October 3, 1781, colonial patriot soldiers under the command of Gen. Benjamin Tallmadge crossed Long Island Sound from Norwalk, Connecticut, and successfully attacked the fort at dawn. One patriot was wounded, Sgt. Elijah Churchill, who was personally given a purple heart by Gen. George Washington and became the first soldier ever to receive this award. Fort Slongo's name changed over the years and the area is now called Fort Salonga.

## Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century

After the Revolutionary War, Great Cow Harbor began to grow. Red Hook was still the center of settlement but the harbor area was gaining importance as sailing vessels with regular schedules, called packets, made call at Bryant's Landing, a wharf owned by farmer Ebenezer Bryant. Local farmers traded the cordwood they cut during the winter for needed supplies, such as fertilizer for their fields, which came from the horses of New York City.



*Cordwood at the landing, 1878*

## Lighthouse

In 1795 it was written that “we find off Eatons Neck a great reef of rocks, dangerous to shipping with many vessels having been wrecked there. It is expected a lighthouse will be built for the advantage of the seamen.” In 1798 the new government of the United States built the Eatons Neck Lighthouse, the second oldest lighthouse on Long Island. Today, the lighthouse is managed by the U.S. Coast Guard.



*Eatons Neck Lighthouse, erected 1798*

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century Beginnings

With the increase in coastal maritime trade there was a petition to the Town of Huntington in 1802 to create a public dock near Bryant's Landing, which would facilitate loading and unloading of cargo. The Town granted the petition and a new wharf was constructed near where the present Village Dock is located.

Most of the valley where Main Street lies was farmland then, stretching between the settlement of Red Hook and the wharf at Cow Harbor. As the harbor gained in importance, the post office was moved from Red Hook down to the new center of activity. In 1837 the name Northport replaced Cow Harbor in the Town records. A second route of access to the harbor



## Industries

Northport's location on a sheltered bay, with a deep harbor and easy access to further waters, encouraged the development of a shipbuilding industry. By the middle of the 1800s shipyards lined the harbor along Bayview Avenue, where over 200 sailing vessels were built or rebuilt through the end of the century. The ships were used mainly in coastal trade and trade with the West Indies and Europe.

Oystering and clamming also became large industries, with the shellfish processed on piers built out into the harbor along Bayview Avenue.

The larger operators set up oyster farming operations and had efficient steam-powered boats built in the shipyards.

Ferry service between Northport and New York City began early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with vessels making a daily trip and lying overnight in Northport. At the end of the century steam power made the trip faster and more predictable.



*Carl Shipyard, 1883*



*Stagecoach at Northport House, ca 1885*

Several hotels were built in Northport to house visitors and traveling salesmen, the first being Northport House at the corner of Main Street and Bayview Avenue, begun in 1824. A horse-drawn stage service connected locally with all the hotels and, beginning in 1867, with the newly completed railroad. The stagecoach was also a primary link with the larger village of Huntington.

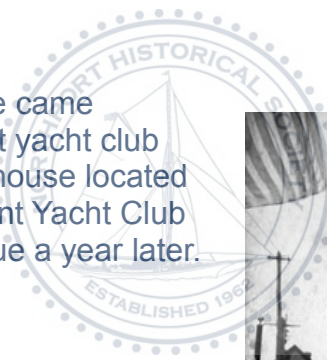
In 1895 the first electric power plant in the Town of Huntington was opened on Woodbine Avenue, with easy access for the coal barges that brought in the plant's power.

In 1888 the Edward Thompson Law Book Company was established and built the large brick building at the corner of Woodbine and Scudder. The company grew dramatically and within a decade had become the largest employer in the village. The influx of lawyers and editors added sophistication to the rural village. A lending library was started, a debating society had frequent and well-attended meetings; and there were theatrical productions, balls and other entertainments offered.

## 1900

At the turn of the century Northport was a lively village, with electric lights, a newspaper, a volunteer fire department and, in 1902, an electric trolley that went up to the new railroad station in East Northport. Woodbine Avenue, Bayview Avenue and nearby streets were dotted with splendid homes built for the shipbuilders, ship captains, oyster "barons," and executives of the law book company.

With the new wealth and leisure time came changes to the social fabric. The first yacht club was organized in 1898 and the clubhouse located on Bayview Avenue. The Independent Yacht Club was established on Woodbine Avenue a year later.



*Trolley service began in 1902*

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

During the past century the Northport experienced a gradual economic descent as the law book company departed, the shipyards became obsolete, sand mining ended and the oyster beds gave out. The waterfront was transformed in the early 1930s with the re-purposing of the shipyards and commercial wharf to a public park and recreational boating dock. Trolley service ceased in 1922 but the village kept the tracks in place on Main Street to honor its past. A revival began in the 1970s with the re-discovery of this attractive, water-oriented village by newcomers recognizing its unique values. In 1962 the Northport Historical Society was established and in 1974 it found its home at the old Carnegie Library built in 1914. By the end of the last century Northport had once again become a vibrant community prepared to meet the future.

## Northport Today

Fishing and shellfishing continue on in Northport with a dedicated commercial dock near the Village Dock serving the needs of the baymen. Pleasure boating provides not only an important recreational activity for area residents but also brings many visitors from afar who frequent the restaurants and shops along Main Street and Woodbine Avenue. A bustling Farmers Market, sidewalk dining, free concerts in the park and other incentives have kept the downtown area busy throughout the year. Service businesses have chosen to locate in Northport because of its unique location appeal and convenient access to New York City.



*Main Street, 2007*

Main Street and the streets that branch from it retain much of the charm of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The buildings and homes are a microcosm of American vernacular architecture, layer upon layer. Homeowners and businesspeople take great pride in maintaining their historic structures. For a closer look, the Historical Society has created two video programs showing “then and now” along Main Street and Bayview Avenue, which can be viewed in the Museum Gallery and purchased in the Museum Shop.