

## Immigrants at the Heart of Kings Park

Long Island bodes a diverse history of immigrants who settled here and fundamentally changed and enriched the fabric of our Island. Immigrants settled in Smithtown for various reasons: education, employment, financial stability, and of course the serene atmosphere unique to our shores. My research explores the story of those who immigrated to Smithtown and settled in Kings Park and San Remo. These ethnic groups can be traced to those who first came with the immigration waves of the late-1800s and instilled deep roots in the developing town. A second wave of immigrants later found footing from the early to mid-1900s; and today their story continues to evolve. These immigrants persevered despite ridicule suffered for their religions, languages, and customs to become pioneers who forever transformed a rural landscape into a thriving community.

The Progressive Era of the late-1800s saw the rise of reformers looking to “clean up” aspects of urban society. One such reformer was Reverend William Augustus Muhlenberg. Working closely with the poor of New York City, he envisioned a “utopian community made up of old men and women, orphans and crippled children, the homeless and friendless.”<sup>1</sup> For his utopia, Dr. Muhlenberg settled on no other place than the farmland of our current Kings Park and created the successful Society of St. Johnland (whose surrounding area adopted the same name). The Board of Supervisors of Kings County in Brooklyn, meanwhile, were searching for ways to relieve hospital overcrowding. Admiring St. Johnland,<sup>2</sup> they “purchased land from the Society of St. Johnland for the establishment of a Kings County Farm that would provide for the care, custody, and relief of the poor and insane of Kings County” in 1872.<sup>3</sup> Despite strong pushback from town residents,<sup>4</sup> cottages were quickly built, and the facility grew at a rapid pace. A community took shape around the hospital, and when the local LIRR station was renamed in 1891, Kings Park was born.<sup>5</sup>

With the establishment of the Kings County Farm came new employment opportunities and Irish immigrants flocked to the town. Despite remarks by townspeople that “the work was the kind...only the

Irish would do,”<sup>6</sup> the hospital became a home for many Irish seeking a better life. Aside from the English who founded Smithtown centuries before, the Irish were the first major immigrant population to settle in Kings Park. The Irish had left their homeland to escape from both the harsh English rule<sup>7</sup> which suppressed their religious freedoms and the potato famine of the mid-1800s which caused over a million to die of starvation and disease.<sup>8</sup> In 1900, the thriving hospital maintained “a 454-employee staff,” and according to the 1900 census “approximately 59 percent of the staff were also immigrants,” while “224 members of the staff were born in Ireland.”<sup>9</sup> These incoming Catholics also led to the establishment of The Church of Saint Joseph, and the nature of the town would set it uniquely apart from the rest of Long Island.

For immigrants seeking stability, it was certainly found at Kings Park. For generations, the hospital sustained the community as a symbol of “security to those who had experienced hard times in Ireland.”<sup>10</sup> Kings Park and its predominately Irish residents were safely isolated from the economic distress facing the rest of the country during the Great Depression. “There was never depression here. There was never a layoff,” said Irish immigrant John Whelan.<sup>11</sup>

In this “town within a town”<sup>12</sup> the young Irish men and women working at the hospital “became acquainted, fell in love, married, and moved off the grounds of the hospital to find a home of their own in Kings Park”<sup>13</sup> and their presence became fixtures in the growing community. Kings Park boasted a nursing school, a farm where workers and patients tilled the soil, and a semi-pro hospital baseball team that drew crowds of hundreds to Tiffany Field. Patients and employees worked alongside each other as bakers, blacksmiths, painters, and shoemakers.<sup>14</sup> Joseph McDonald, an Irish immigrant, left Carlow, Ireland in 1888 to first work in Wisconsin but in 1892 he settled in Kings Park to work as a kitchen helper at the hospital. There he met his future wife, Katherine Coyle who in 1896 immigrated to New York City from Sligo, Ireland. “News of work at the State Hospital drew her to Kings Park where she worked for one year as a nurse’s aide.”<sup>15</sup> Then Joseph and Katherine married and settled in “The Hollows” area,

which is currently San Remo. Joseph McDonald worked at the hospital until 1920 and afterwards became an influential town figure. He was a foreman for the Highway Department and “later went into politics and was Smithtown Town Assessor until his death in 1940.”<sup>16</sup> In fact all five of the McDonald family children were employed at the hospital as it was very common at the time for generations to work there together. Their four sons “all worked at the State Hospital, in the kitchen, as their father before them, but as Head Cooks rather than as a helper” while their daughter “worked in the offices of the State Hospital until her retirement”<sup>17</sup> The McDonald family is one example of the Irish immigrants whose generational legacy formed Kings Park as we know it today.

Higher education provided by the center’s nursing school was valued among the men and women. “I couldn’t afford to go to college,” said Bernard (Joe) O’Neill, the one-time chief of nursing. “Many of us who were unable to go to college went into the state hospital for nursing because they paid us \$30-a-month and gave us room and board.”<sup>18</sup>

Smithtown residents watched the Irish immigrants flock to staff the hospital and criticized that they turned Kings Park into a “poor-man’s town.” In the hospital’s early days, the pay was “only \$54 a month with only five days off [and] they had to be taken consecutively. The work was the kind some said with a sneer, that only the Irish would do.”<sup>19</sup> One time resident, Tom Kelly, whose parents were Irish immigrants, said “When I was a kid, they [all the parents] worked at the hospital. We never knew there was another type of job.”<sup>20</sup> Along with the many Irish who came to work in the hospital, a significant number of Italian workers came as well. In 1892, “between seventy-five and 100 Italians [were] employed at Kings Park, near St. Johnland, on the Kings County insane institution and poor farms” living “in a series of mud huts built in the woods nearby.”<sup>21</sup> Often, the Italians working there in the late-1800s had a bad reputation for rum-running and other liquor offenses and were arrested during raids.<sup>22</sup>

However, the hamlet of Kings Park eventually became a summer retreat for land-hungry Italian Americans who built beach bungalows in the hilly San Remo section beginning in the 1920’s.<sup>23</sup> Generoso

Pope, publisher of *Il Corriere* (currently *Il Progresso*), purchased 194 acres near Nissequogue Harbor in Smithtown filled with green hills and fruit trees reminiscent of the Italian Riviera and aptly named San Remo. City-sized blocks of 5,728 lots of 20-by-100ft, with homes priced at \$300 were advertised for sale – along with a 3-year subscription to the Italian paper. “Town records show that the response was immediate. Page after page in the assessor’s books from 1928 show deeds signed to the Corriere Holding Corp.”<sup>24</sup> Trainloads of Italians came to Kings Park. “The newspaper would treat them to a free trip and have an agent to meet them,” said Walter Commerdinger, a real estate agent. “He’d walk them up and down the land and give them sandwiches and beer.”<sup>25</sup> Many Italian homeowners lost homes during the depression, but a few held on despite being ostracized. “We build these little cottages with [an] outhouse,” said Rose Marino. “The Irish people from Kings Park, they wouldn’t have any part of us. They’d say, ‘Oh you’re from the Guineas hole.’”<sup>26</sup>

Although home to several different cultures at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigrant populations still faced discrimination in Smithtown. A symbol of this sentiment is the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in our town after World War I, when the rapid changes of post-Great War society spurred growth of the clan as “a reactionary force that opposed any change from traditional thinking”<sup>27</sup> and desired a so-called purification of American society. An estimated “one out of every eight Long Island residents belonged to the K.K.K.,” a society exclusive to “white Gentile males, born in the Protestant faith in the U.S.”<sup>28</sup> The main target of the clan was the “foreign threat” of immigrants, with mostly Irish Catholics and Italians considered “undesirables.” The K.K.K. worked to incite fear and intimidate Catholic immigrants, sometimes breaking in and searching the homes of “decent citizens” who “were labeled ‘undesirables’” with the “pretext of looking for illegal liquor.”<sup>29</sup> Burning crosses were placed in front of the houses of undesirables and Catholic churches, such as St. Patrick’s Church “on at least three occasions,” which eventually burned down in a “mysterious brush fire.”<sup>30</sup> This regrettable K.K.K. fever died down at the

start of the Great Depression as residents had to learn to work together to survive, and because immigrants are truly too integral to the community for such a society to be sustained.<sup>31</sup>

While most of Long Island saw drastic changes to their towns as the “1960s building boom” led to the creation of sprawling suburbs, Kings Park remained isolated from upper-class development and unique for many years. “The Park, as it was well known, was an Irish stew: Catholic, Democratic, blue-collar, hard-drinking, and proud of it.”<sup>32</sup> King Park for decades kept a small town feel with immigrant values because life revolved around the hospital and to outsiders “the thought of living near a state mental hospital scared off most homebuyers.”<sup>33</sup> However that way of life began to change as “the area’s Irish community has been diluted by intermarriage” and “young people have moved away from their families.” This dwindling concentration became apparent in the 60s and 70s, when the 1970<sup>34</sup> U.S. census read that “only 466 of Kings Park’s 5,555 residents were either first or second generation Irish,”<sup>35</sup> but pubs and Irish traditions still held on. When the Kings Park Psychiatric Center formally shut down in 1996, Kings Park came “out from under the hospital’s shadow” and the town lost its “ability to scare away buyers.”<sup>36</sup> With it what had been the original cultural hub for the Irish population for over a century was also lost, but the legacy that those pioneers have had on Kings Park is perpetual.

*With sincere gratitude I would like to thank Ms. Caren Zatyk , librarian at the Smithtown Branch, Long Island Room for all her assistance during this research.*

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<sup>1</sup> Ft. Salonga, *Kings Park, San Remo, Smithtown Yesterday and Today*, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> “The [hospital] should be in a healthful, pleasant and fertile district of the country; the land chosen should be of good quality and easily tilled; the surrounding scenery should be of a varied and attractive kind, and the neighborhood should possess numerous objects of agreeable and interesting character. While the hospital itself should be retired and its privacy fully secured, it is desirable that the views from it should exhibit life in its active forms, and on this account stirring objects at a little distance are desirable.” (Thomas M. Kirkbride, MD, pg. 7, *On the Construction, Organization, and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane*, 1854, p. 7.)

<sup>3</sup> Harris, Bradley. *News of Long Ago: St. Johnland Becomes Kings Park*, The Smithtown News, 12 June 1980.

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<sup>4</sup> In Kings County, N.Y. there was a need to provide relief from overcrowding in the poorhouse and asylums of Brooklyn. The New York State Legislature granted permission to purchase “900 acres stretching south from the mouth of the Nissequogue and establish a rural branch of the Kings County Asylum.” The residents of Smithtown and the town board were against the idea and convened a special town meeting where a group of citizens proposed a “resolution to raise by tax \$500 for the purpose of employing eminent lawyers to defend at law this town from being invaded by the so-called Kings County Farm.” The resolution was defeated, and construction began. The hospital opened in 1885.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, Rebecca. “*Centennial Summer in Kings Park: A Community Born in a Hospital for Thousands of Immigrants, Kings Park Meant Jobs and Friends.*” *Newsday*, 23 May 1985, pg. A1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> In the 1800s the English rule of Ireland drove Irish Catholics to find a new home. They had been denied education and employment because they chose Catholicism over the English Protestant religion. With land leased from English aristocrats they depended on potato crops for survival. When a blight destroyed their crops between 1845 and 1850, they died from starvation and disease. About a million Irish decided to come to take the dangerous trip across the ocean to America’s shores and most set their destinations for New York. Being poor and with little resources to go further, they sought jobs in New York and across Long Island.

<sup>8</sup> Altshul, Jack. “*Yearning to Breathe Free: Long Island Was Settled by People From Many Different Lands...*” *Newsday*, 4 July 1976, pg. 9L1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, Bradley. *News of Long Ago: The Long Island State Hospital at Kings Park*, *The Smithtown News*, 29 July 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Fischkin, Barbara. “*Air of Eire Still Lingers in Irish Kings Park.*” *Newsday*, 8 Apr. 1980, pg. 6. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Morris, Rebecca. “*Centennial Summer in Kings Park: A Community Born in a Hospital for Thousands of Immigrants, Kings Park Meant Jobs and Friends.*” *Newsday*, 23 May 1985, pg. A1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, Bradley. *News of Long Ago: Old Timers in Kings Park*, *The Smithtown News*, 2 October 1980.

<sup>14</sup> By 1973, Kings Park and other New York State institutions were ordered to no longer make their patients work.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Morris, Rebecca. “*Centennial Summer in Kings Park: A Community Born in a Hospital for Thousands of Immigrants, Kings Park Meant Jobs and Friends.*” *Newsday*, 23 May 1985, pg. A1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Vespa, Mary. “*Back on the Right Side of the Tracks.*” *Newsday*, 18 Apr. 1972, pg. 17. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>21</sup> *One Italian Kills Another: Little Probability That the Criminal Will Ever Be Brought to Justice*, *The Sun*, 24 February 1892.

<sup>22</sup> “Seized A Lot of Rum: Quantities of It Poured into Jail Sewer by Order of Judge Griffing / Authorities Act Quickly.” *The County Review*, 10 Feb. 1911. [Riverhead, N.Y.].

<sup>23</sup> Rather, John. “*A Quiet Hamlet Where Roots Are Deep.*” *New York Times*, 01 Dec. 2002, pg. 11.3.

<sup>24</sup> Spencer, Hope. “*From a Small Start a Place to Live.*” *Newsday*, 11 Feb. 1974, pg. 17. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Gish, Noel. “*Smithtown New York 1660-1929: Looking Back Through the Lens.*” The Donning Company Publishers, 1996.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Greene, Robert W. “*The Transformation of Kings Park: A North Shore Hamlet with a Blue-Collar Past.*” *Newsday*, 28 Jan. 1984, pg. C1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> By the 1970s many immigrants began to move away. “According to the 1970 U.S. census, only 466 of Kings Park’s 5,555 residents were either first or second-generation Irish. Residents say most of the Irish immigrants came in a steady stream to Kings Park between the early 1900s, to staff the hospital, and the mid-1950s, when suburban development began in Kings Park.”

<sup>35</sup> Fischkin, Barbara. “*Air of Eire Still Lingers in Irish Kings Park.*” *Newsday*, 8 Apr. 1980, pg. 6. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>36</sup> Greene, Robert W. “*The Transformation of Kings Park: A North Shore Hamlet with a Blue-Collar Past.*” *Newsday*, 28 Jan. 1984, pg. C1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

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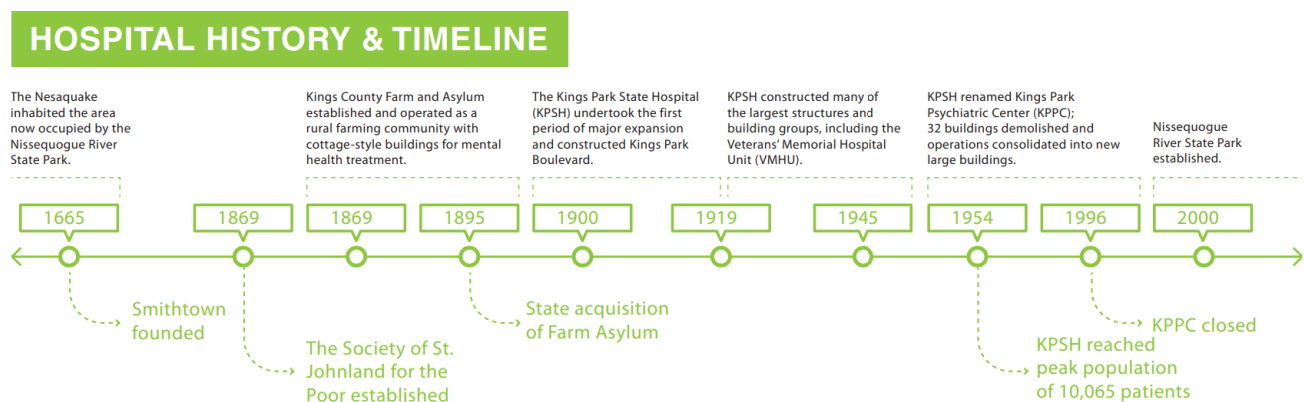
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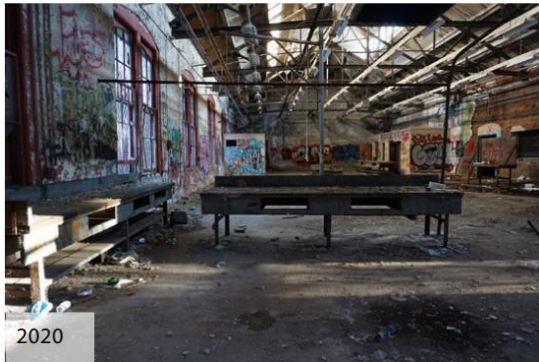
### Referenced Sources: Photos



(source: <https://parks.ny.gov/documents/inside-our-agency/Masterplans/NSRP/NSRPMOutreachBoard2021.pdf>)



LAUNDRY (BUILDING 5)



FIREHOUSE (BUILDING 83)



DOCTORS' COTTAGES



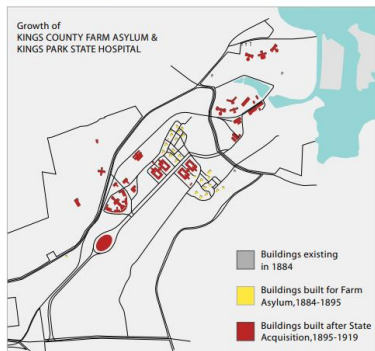
YORK HALL (BUILDING 80)



(source: <https://parks.ny.gov/documents/inside-our-agency/Masterplans/NSRP/NSRPMOutreachBoard2021.pdf>)

FARM ASYLUM & STATE ACQUISITION

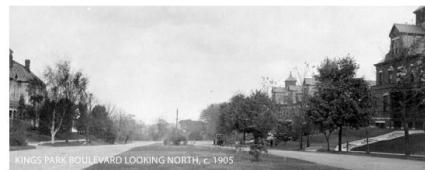
1884-1919



From 1884-1895, the Kings County Farm and Asylum operated as a self-sustaining community for treating mentally ill patients. Life centered around land cultivation, which was thought to provide a therapeutic benefit within a serene and controlled environment. Both patients and staff were housed in simple wood-framed cottages.

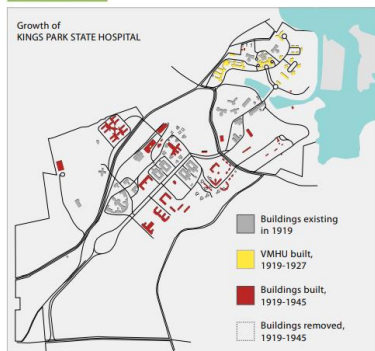


In 1895, the state assumed operations of the asylum and began to improve and expand the institution. By 1900, there were over 2,000 patients and staff, prompting the construction of larger, more permanent ward buildings and the development of active and occupational therapy programs.

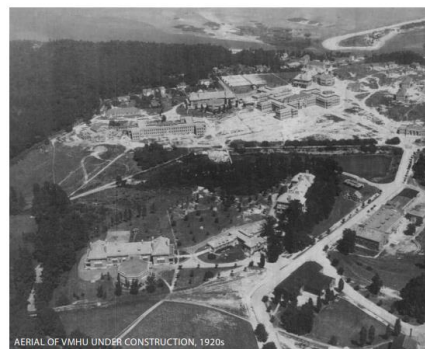
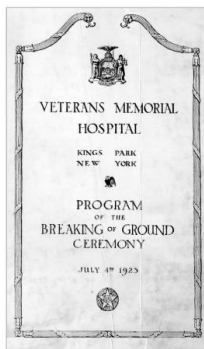


INTERWAR EXPANSION

1919-1945

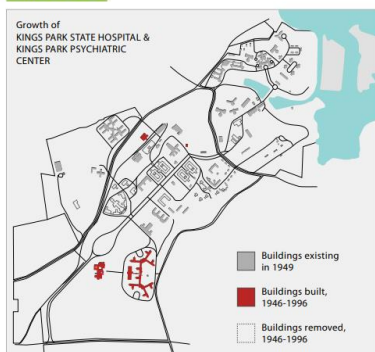


Following WWI, the hospital underwent its single largest phase of expansion. Known as the Veterans' Memorial Hospital Unit (VMHU), the development consisted of 21 buildings constructed at the north end of the campus. Opened in 1927, it was the first state mental facility dedicated entirely to the treatment of disabled veterans.



POSTWAR CONSOLIDATION

1946-1996



The hospital continued to expand after WWII and reached a peak population of 10,000 patients and staff by 1954. In 1955, Thorazine and other drugs used to mental disorders were introduced in the United States, making permanent institutionalization less necessary. Between 1960 and 1970, the hospital's population dropped by nearly 50% and the institution began to experience financial difficulties. Larger structures, like Building 7, were constructed to replace older, poorly maintained wards and consolidate operations. Between 1965 and 1975, the hospital demolished over 40 buildings, many dating from the late 19th-century.



(source: <https://parks.ny.gov/documents/inside-our-agency/Masterplans/NSRP/NSRPMOutreachBoard2021.pdf>)