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EARLY HISTORY
OF
SUFFOLK COUNTY, L. I.

BY HON. HENRY NICOLL.

A PAPER

READ BEFORE THE

Long Island Historical Society,

NOVEMBER 16, 1865.

Brooklyn:
PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY.
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MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN, MEMBERS OF THE LONG
ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY :

HAVING been invited by the Agricultural Society of Suffolk County to deliver the customary address at their recent Fair, I deemed the occasion not an improper one for an inquiry into the causes which have operated in impeding the development of the resources of the eastern part of Long Island and in giving to its people a distinctive character from the rest of our State.

These causes are, in my opinion, to be found in the political history of two centuries ago ; the events of that day when Long Island became a part of the royal province of New York have exercised a marked influence in keeping the people of Suffolk county in a condition of comparative isolation which is far from yet having ended.

It is true that within the past few years a large immigration has been flowing into the county, attracted thither by the soft and genial climate of the shores of the Sound and of the seaside ; and the influence of this additional population upon the habits, manners, and modes of thought of the people is, undoubtedly, every year, becoming more manifest—still, it must be admitted that, even at this present day, there is no part of our State where there has been so little change since the old colonial, pre-revolutionary times, or where there are so many communities which have retained the primitive

habits and manners, and, may I not add, the simple virtues of their ancestors.

In the address referred to, I endeavored, as far as the limited time which I could properly devote to the subject in an address on agricultural matters would permit, to trace these causes, and to show how they had tended to produce the effects which, in my opinion, flowed from them. My examination of the subject, however, for the reasons already given, was necessarily cursory, and I was scarcely able to do more than glance at topics which deserve a more careful and extended consideration.

Some kind, but, perhaps, too partial friends, thinking that the subject, treated by me, even in this imperfect manner, would not be uninteresting to the members of the Long Island Historical Society, have asked me to read, before your body, so much of the address as relates to the matters in question. While fully appreciating the compliment implied by this request, I have yielded to it with some reluctance, fearing that what I have written will scarcely suit the critical taste of those who are accustomed to a minute investigation of early historic periods and of their influence upon later ages. I can only regret that I have not had the time to amplify the subject, and, instead of a hasty and generalizing sketch, to have worked up, out of the rich materials at hand, a more complete and accurate paper.

May I venture to express the hope that, at no distant day, this may be done by some other and abler hand ?

After some remarks of a local character, in relation to the Fair then in process of exhibition, the address proceeded as follows :

Shall I wound the pride of my audience if I say that, in view of their great natural advantages, the people of Suffolk county have not made a progress commensurate with them. With a varied and fertile soil ; with a climate as salubrious as any that can be found on the face of the globe ; the mighty ocean on one side, and the blue sound on the other,

tempering alike the heats of summer and the rigors of winter ; with the great metropolis of the nation within a few hours' reach, why is it that the eastern part of Long Island has not advanced like other portions of the state ? Why is it that while most, if not all our towns were settled more than a century and several of them two centuries ago, there still exists within their boundaries so many acres of untilled land ? Why is it that, while the great wave of progress which has gone over the breadth and length of our country, from the East to the West, until the Pacific coast itself is alive with the advancing civilization of the Anglo-Saxon race, scarcely more than a ripple has been made by it on the quiet stream of our existence ? The fact, unpalatable as it may be, must be confessed that, while all outside our boundaries has been to a greater or less extent advancing, we have comparatively been standing still.

I propose, although, perhaps, at the risk of dwelling upon matters not strictly suitable to an occasion like this, to examine very briefly into what I deem to be the causes which have operated to give the people of Suffolk county a distinctive character, and which have prevented that progress in opening up and developing their resources, which otherwise would have been made. As in my opinion these causes were of early origin, and are chiefly political, I must ask of you to go back with me a couple of centuries ; for, unless I am greatly mistaken, events which then took place, particularly affecting the welfare of the early settlers of this "wilderness country," as it was quaintly called by some of them, continued to exercise a most serious influence adverse to the best interests of this people, and that the effect of them has not, even now, wholly passed away.

What European eye first saw this island of ours is necessarily involved in uncertainty ; perhaps Cabot, that bold navigator, who, at the close of the fifteenth century, discovered the continent of North America, and through whose tracing of its eastern shores, along so many degrees of latitude the British crown laid its claim to the vast territory

which it afterwards acquired, may have seen the dim outline of the southern coast of Long Island ; the adventurous Verezano, as he sailed along the continent a few years afterwards, may also have gazed upon it. The western part of the island was, as we all know, visited by Hudson nearly a century afterward, when he entered the river which bears his name, and probably that illustrious discoverer obtained, from his intercourse with its native inhabitants, some general information as to the character and extent of the island. The real discoverer of Long Island, however, was Adrien Block, who in the little yacht, the "Restless," built at the trading post of New Amsterdam, in the year 1614, sailed through the sound in that year, and made himself acquainted with the geographical formation of the island. Block was the first navigator who had ventured into these waters, and it was during this voyage that he discovered the island which still bears his name.

In the autumn of the same year the West India Company were incorporated by the states general of Holland as a trading corporation, and the Netherlands placed under their charge. On the map of their territory, published a couple of years after, in Holland, Long Island is laid down with sufficient accuracy to enable us to perceive that its position and general geographical character had been ascertained by the Dutch navigators. New Amsterdam, at the mouth of the Hudson, the nucleus of our great city of New York, was formally established by the West India Company as a trading post at the close of 1614 ; the Dutch at once proceeded, with considerable vigor, to send colonists to the province ; settlements were soon established on the western part of Long Island, and probably within a few years the authorities of the West India Company had explored the whole island, and had become acquainted with its topography and character.

As early as the year 1640 we find a Dutch traveller who had visited the province describing Long Island as the very crown of New Netherlands. In fact, its natural advantages and resources were well understood by the Dutch,

but not all the alluring descriptions of its material wealth, its timber, its vast production of shell-fish, out of which the wampun, or seawan, the Indians' money could be made, and be profitably exchanged with them for furs and skins, seem to have tempted the Hollander to venture within the recesses of the eastern part of the island. There were never any Dutch settlements farther east than the western limits of Oyster Bay, in Queens county ; and, even on the western part of the island, in close contiguity with New Amsterdam itself, there were many English communities established which unwillingly acknowledged the Dutch authority ; in fact, the English were to be found more or less scattered throughout the Dutch possessions, as well on the island as on the main.

I do not propose to detain you by an account of the disputes which began at an early day between the New England people and their Dutch neighbors. Undoubtedly the former acting under that mysterious instinct which seems to have been implanted within them for providential purposes, were constantly pressing on to the West, without troubling themselves much as to who were the rightful owners of the land which they might occupy. It would be difficult to characterize many of their settlements on the main land as anything less than direct and unjustifiable encroachments upon territory of which the Dutch were not only the discoverers, but of which they were in the actual possession : but it was far different with this eastern part of Long Island ; what European nation was its discoverer was a question on which men might differ ; but assuredly it had never been actually, and probably not even constructively, occupied by the Dutch. So early as the year 1618 the Earl of Sterling obtained a conveyance of the whole of Long Island from the British Crown. Under a grant from this nobleman, made by his agent in the year 1639, and confirmed in the same year by himself, the entire part of Long Island, lying easterly of the Peconic river, was conveyed to Edward Howell, Daniel How, and Job Say-er, in trust for themselves and their associates.

The country was then emphatically a wilderness, occupied

sparsely by the native Indians. These New England men—they were all of the old Puritan stock—immediately took active measures for the settlement of the extensive territory granted to them. The hardy pioneers came from the main land and within a few years settlements were formed at East Hampton, South Hampton, and Southold. During the twenty years which preceded the reduction of the province of New Netherlands by the expedition fitted out by the Duke of York, there had been a large influx of people from the main shore to the eastern part of the island. The three towns already mentioned had been organized into well-established communities. Setalkat, first known by the names of Ashford and Cromwell's Bay; and at a later date, and after the conquest, created by Colonel Nicolls a town by the name of Brook Haven, had already attracted a considerable number of settlers, in fact the whole coast, from the easternmost extremity of the island quite up to the western limits of Oyster Bay, was dotted with settlements made from the main. So early as 1660 East Hampton, South Hampton and Southold were formally, upon the express request of their inhabitants, annexed to and became component parts of the colonies of Connecticut and New Haven.

Setalkat's representative sat in the General Court at Hartford, and in fact the whole people, as well of these towns as of the thinly scattered settlements along our shores, and within the interior of the island, knew no other government save those already mentioned, and were virtually and actually within the jurisdiction of these flourishing colonies which shortly after were constituted by their charter a single government under the name of Connecticut. These Long Island settlements were as much under the protection of Connecticut as the outlying settlements far up the Connecticut, or Fresh River, as it was then called, or those adventurous men who had pushed so far to the West that they stood almost face to face with the Dutch. All alike recognized the government at Hartford and New Haven as their common mother

to whom their allegiance was due and from whom they were entitled to protection.

In the year 1662 Charles the Second granted to the people of Connecticut a charter as free and democratic in its spirit and provisions as any constitution of modern times. That a grant like this should have been obtained from a monarch, such as Charles the Second very shortly after proved himself to be, may naturally excite our surprise, but it must be remembered that the father of John Winthrop, the governor of the colony, had rendered great services to the unfortunate father of Charles, and this charter, so valuable to the people of Connecticut, may have been obtained through the personal influence of their governor with the monarch. Moreover the grant was made very shortly after an equally free charter had been given to Rhode Island, and not long after Charles the Second's accession to his throne. Perhaps it was his policy, in making these liberal grants, to stand well with the great Puritan or Republican party which, although defeated and fallen, constituted no insignificant part of the people of Great Britain ; it was certainly not an unwise act on the part of the King to conciliate them by the concession, to a couple of small and distant colonies of privileges which would upon no consideration have been granted to his subjects at home. Be this as it may, the charter of Connecticut, recognizing as it did, in the largest sense the principles of free government, was eminently calculated to promote the interests of the people to whom it was granted. By its provisions they enjoyed the right of governing themselves, of directing their own concerns, without interference on the part of the Crown ; they elected all their officers from the governor to the lowest magistrate ; their dependence upon the Government of Great Britain was scarcely more than nominal.

Such was in fact the government under which the people of Suffolk county had been living for more than two years when the expedition, fitted out for the reduction of the New Netherlands, arrived upon our shores. This act of

James, the Duke of York, and in which his brother Charles, the King, participated, cannot be characterized as anything less than one of barefaced spoliation. In a time of profound peace and under a pretext so flimsy that no statesman or publicist would dare to defend it, the Duke of York sends a hostile squadron to the New Netherlands and by mere brute force wrests from its lawful owners a territory of which they had been in the undisputed possession for more than half a century. How bitterly the dissolute and mercenary Charles was, a few years afterwards, made to feel the consequences of this unjust and unprovoked invasion I need not stop to inquire ; suffice it to say the day shortly came when De Ruyter's flag flouted the Thames ; when the arsenals of the King and his dock-yards were burned by the victorious Dutch, and the British fleet ignominiously scattered over the seas.

But our business is with Long Island and I must hurry on lest I weary your patience. The conquest of the New Netherlands was a sad misfortune to the English settlements on Long Island. Directly after the surrender of the city of New Amsterdam by its gallant old governor, Peter Stuyvesant, Colonel Nicolls, the commander of the expedition, who had been intrusted with the government, entered into negotiations with the governor of Connecticut for a settlement of the boundaries of the respective provinces ; commissioners were appointed on either side ; the negotiation resulted in permitting Connecticut to establish a western boundary within twenty miles of the Hudson river, which was far nearer that river than the province had ever before claimed the right to go, but in exchange for this grant, and it pains me while I say it, the whole of Long Island, without reservation, was transferred to the tender mercies of the Duke of York. It does not appear that the people most interested were consulted in regard to this measure so destructive to everything that was dear to them. Verily were they stricken down in the house of their friends.

When made acquainted with the fact they were curtly told

in reply to their remonstrances, that in the charter of his most sacred Majesty to his grasping brother, Long Island had been expressly, and by name, included as a part of the territory granted; it did not seem to be convenient to those who made this specious excuse for an unwarranted and most cruel act, to remember that in the same grant all the land from the west side of the Connecticut river to the Delaware bay had also been similarly conveyed, and which covered no inconsiderable part of the colony of Connecticut.

There is very little doubt that Connecticut was a large gainer by the result of this negotiation, and that she could well afford to give up her outlying settlements on Long Island in exchange for a perfect title to so large and fertile a territory on the main. A century after we find the historian Smith characterizing this settlement as having been made in ignorance and fraud, and in the controversies which afterwards arose between the governments of New York and Connecticut, as to their boundary line, the latter were openly charged with having taken, by reason of their superior and more accurate knowledge of the country, an unfair advantage in their conferences with the commissioners acting in behalf of the province of New York.

But let us for a single moment glance at the condition to which the people of Long Island had been reduced by this most unkind treatment on the part of those to whom they had the right to look for protection. From being the members of one of the freest governments on the face of the earth, they were by the stroke of a pen, made the subjects of a merciless, heartless despot—a man who though forced at the time to be in outward observances a Protestant, was by his instincts and education a Papist, a man who under the narrow and uncharitable dogmas of that day regarded every one who did not believe in the doctrines of the Church of Rome as a heretic worthy of punishment in this world, and sure of eternal condemnation in the next.

I must confess that in reading the history of these times I am always struck with surprise, that this act of the provincial

commissioners is passed over as of little importance ; I cannot but regard it as sullyng, in no small degree, the memory of John Winthrop, and I grieve to say so because this illustrious governor of Connecticut in his wise and vigorous administration of the affairs of that colony has earned for himself so great a name that it is painful to say anything in disparagement of him.

In the meanwhile Connecticut waxed and grew fat ; a vast immigration came to her shores and her progress in every respect was marked and worthy of the free institutions under which her people lived and prospered. Turn we, however, to our own people ; the tide of immigration which had been setting to our shores from the main was at once stopped, nor could it be otherwise ; no man in his senses would exchange the freedom of a New England Colony, for the practical servitude which he must live under in this royal province where the people were governed by the deputy of the Duke of York under such laws as he and his master might think fit to enact. The Englishman's birthright to make his own laws was denied to the people of this colony ; they were completely at the feet of their master. That a community so governed could grow in numbers and wealth was a sheer impossibility ; accordingly from the time of the conquest of the province and until long after the Stuart dynasty had been subverted, we have continued complaints of the stagnation of the province, and of its slow rate of progress when compared with its freer neighbors.

The people of the eastern part of the island were sullen and discontented, chafing under the rule which had been imposed upon them ; with no feelings of friendship towards the other inhabitants of the province, entertaining a deep sense of the wrong which had been done to them, how sadly must they have turned their eyes to the main land across the sound, their old home and with which they had been so closely allied ; they could not look for sympathy or comfort there ; and yet the old feelings of consanguinity and fraternity could not die out at once. Year after year they still hoped that

in the progress of events they might again be united with their old parent, and when, in the year 1673, the province was recaptured by the Dutch, the people sought, but sought in vain, to be permitted to return to the old colony. The treaty at Breda, in the succeeding year, dispelled all hope; the province again became a part of the British possessions and our people resigned themselves to their inevitable fate. Can it be wondered that a people thus treated, abandoned by those whose duty it was to protect them, and regarded by those under whose government they were compelled to live, with indifference, if not contempt should have necessarily become isolated from their fellows.

Almost the entire population of the island were dissenters, the established Church of England exercised complete sway over the rest of the province, and flushed with the triumph of her resuscitation, she not only could not forgive, but sought every means to humiliate and oppress the great Puritan party, her persistent and, up to that time, successful opponents.

Years rolled on, governor after governor, in his report to the authorities at home, complains of the unfriendly feeling of the people of the eastern part of Long Island towards the Government, and of their indisposition to have any relations of trade with New York. Governor Dongan, in his report on the state of the province in 1687, says: "that most part of the people of the island, especially towards the east end, are of the same stamp with those of New England, refractory and very loath to have any commerce with this place" (New York). The dissolute Cornbury and other royal governors are equally vehement in their denunciation of the people of Suffolk county.

In a report on the state of the established church in the colony, even so late as the year 1704, it is stated that there was not a single Episcopal church on the eastern part of Long Island. Have I not said enough to satisfy you that if the people of this old county are justly chargeable with being a peculiar people and inclined to live by themselves there are sufficient causes for their being so.

One of the necessary results of the absence of immigration

was that large districts of territory throughout the province remained in a state of nature, and being crown lands the governors were permitted to grant them to individuals. These lands were taken up in large tracts and to a large extent in Suffolk county. The injurious effect of this ill-judged practice I cannot describe better than in the language of Cadwalader Colden, surveyor-general of the province, afterwards its governor, who, in a report on the state of the lands in the province in 1732, in speaking of the grants which had been made with such improvident and lavish hand in this province, says that "the consequence had been most injurious as to the improvement of the country, for although this was settled many years before Pennsylvania and some of the neighboring colonies, and has many advantages over them as to the situation and conveniences of trade, it is not near so well cultivated, nor are there such a number of inhabitants as in the others in proportion to the quantity of land ; and it is chiefly, if not only, where these large grants are made where the country remains uncultivated, though they contain some of the best lands and the most conveniently situated ; and every year the people go from this province and purchase land in the neighboring colonies; the reason is that the grantees themselves are not, nor ever were, in a capacity to improve such large tracts ; and other people will not become their vassals or tenants, for one great reason of people's (the better sort especially) leaving their native country was to avoid the dependence on landlords, and to enjoy lands in fee to descend to their posterity, that their children may reap the benefit of their labor and industry."

All of us must admit the force and truth of these statements of Governor Colden ; the evils complained of by him existed in a marked degree in Suffolk county, and are not one of the least of the causes which have retarded its development. We are, it is true, gradually removing this obstacle ; probably the great fire of 1862, in proving how very uncertain it is that these lands can be profitably kept for the wood produced upon them, will be found to have done

much towards it, but it cannot be denied that the existence of these large bodies of uncultivated land owned by those who were unable to till them and who have not as yet been willing to dispose of them has worked, through a long series of years, much against the best interests of the county.

I have said that the people of this part of the state became, by the force of circumstances beyond their control, an isolated and a peculiar people; may I not also say that if our ancestors, thus shut off, alike by friend and foe, lived by themselves, they nevertheless practised all those virtues which nowhere are so fully exhibited as in small communities, where wealth is divided, where there are no overgrown fortunes, where the most just earth renders willingly what the simple wants of the tiller of the soil requires.

The pastoral age has ever been the poets' theme, that golden age when man is supposed to have lived a life of innocence; although such an era has no existence, save in that longing of the human heart for the purer and better life, from which we have fallen, but which can never be realized, we still feel that in a state of society like that which we can fancy existed along the shores of this county for many years, there was some approach to that old life of innocence, when man dealt honestly with his fellow-man, and the earth was not given up to wickedness. If indeed such a life, though it may not exist, can ever be approached, it must be amongst the early tillers of the soil, those sons of nature, ever living with her and looking to her alone as she brings forth her varied fruits as the source of all their blessings. These are the men, indeed, of simple lives who are slow to be corrupted.

*"Aureus hanc vitam in terris Saturnus agebat,
Necdum etiam audierant inflari classica, necdum,
Impositos duris crepitare incendibus enses."*

The Latin poet, Virgil, in his well-known *Georgics*, which were written amidst the fierce conflicts that preceded and attended the breaking up of the Roman Republic, looking at the quiet life of the simple cultivators of the Italian soil,

and feeling intensely its superiority in such times over that life of warfare which was then everywhere around him, exclaims in touching and beautiful verse, that Justice, when she bade adieu to the earth, left her last footsteps among the farmers.

Our county, then, all frugal and primitive as she was in those early years of her existence, became the fit mother to rear children who, at a later day, were to perform a noble part in a wider sphere. Here the spirit of liberty did not die out ; though our people sullenly submitted to the rule which had been imposed upon them, they could not lose sight of their birthright as freeborn Englishmen.

Although in the grossly unfair representation of the several counties of the province in the General Assembly, Suffolk county was, as might be expected, denied the full share to which she was entitled by reason of her population and property, she nevertheless sent her best sons to that legislative body. For nineteen consecutive years William Nicoll, one of the ablest of her citizens, represented Suffolk county in the Colonial Assembly, and for the greater part of the time was the Speaker of that body. In all the contests which arose between the Assembly and the colonial government, he was uniformly found on the side of the people, vigilantly looking after their interests and protecting their rights from encroachment.

Let me call up also before you that heroic old man, Captain Samuel Mulford, who, unterrified by threats of imprisonment, asserted the rights and exposed the wrongs that had been done to his native county, and who, to obtain redress for them, went to England, where he fearlessly denounced the conduct of the colonial officials ; and not without effect. His simple dress, his unaffected manners, his serious and earnest demeanor, obtained for him the respect of the British people, and they learned to look upon him as a worthy defender of their distant countrymen, who still practised the manners and retained the virtues of their Puritan ancestors.

Mulford's memory is gratefully cherished by every one at

all familiar with our early history. He was in truth a man of whom Long Island may justly be proud.

Time rolled on, and the day approached when the British colonies were to assert their independence. Is it not our pride to say that the sons of Suffolk county were always found with a unanimity unexampled in any other part of the colony, resisting the encroachments of the crown.

For the six consecutive years which preceded the revolution, one of the ablest opponents of the colonial government in the General Assembly, was Nathaniel Woodhull, a member from the county of Suffolk. In connection with George Clinton and General Schuyler, General Woodhull assisted to bring about the crisis which inaugurated the Revolution in this colony. He was the President of the first Provincial Congress, and during the period of his office was in fact the Governor of the State of New York. You all know his untimely fate: just after the disastrous battle of Long Island, while attended only by a few followers, he was surprised by a body of the enemy's cavalry, and though surrendering himself as a prisoner, was inhumanly cut to the ground. Shortly afterwards, languishing under his wounds, he died in a British prison. Had General Woodhull lived, it cannot be doubted from what we know of his many noble traits of character and his earnest patriotism, that he would have been one of the foremost men of the Revolution; and William Floyd, too, who represented our state in the Congress of the United States, and who had as such the glorious privilege of signing the Declaration of Independence, the neighbor and intimate friend of General Woodhull; were not these men, descended as they were, both from Puritan stock, worthy of the race from which they sprung? They were indeed fit representatives of their ancestors; they embodied in themselves all those virtues and energies which had been brought to our shores, and which had been kept alive for more than a century when they blossomed with such glorious fruit.

The memory of these men, and of many others who were native here, and like them embraced the cause of the

Revolution, is dear to Suffolk county, and now when this nation, after four years of fratricidal contest, has been able to preserve the government which our ancestors formed, overthrowing the most stupendous rebellion the world has ever seen, and demonstrating the intense vitality of a free government, and its entire capacity to protect its own life, as well against internal dissension, as attack from without, do we not feel that those heroic men who pledged their lives, their fortune, and their sacred honor, to achieve our independence, are doubly ennobled? Verily were the foundations of their work well laid down deep in the hearts of the people, and all honor to their posterity who nearly a century after, have in these glorious latter days, been able to defend and preserve the rich heritage bequeathed to them, and to put it on foundations which cannot be overthrown.

Pardon me if I have lingered too long on these olden times of our county's history, but I know you will forgive me if I have shown you how much we all have to admire in the simple lives of our ancestors, and that if we cannot compare with other parts of the state as favorably as we would desire in the development of our resources, we can at least look back with manly pride upon the past, and feel that in the great struggle of the Revolution, our county played no insignificant part.

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