

HISTORY OF THE ROCKAWAYS

The following condensed history of the Rockaways is not all inclusive. It skips around and it skips a lot, but it does outline a skeleton of the past of a Peninsula whose future should shine even more brightly than its occasionally brilliant past.

One of the biggest points of dispute between the handful of Rockaway historians is how the Peninsula came to get its name.

The most accepted derivative of the world "Rockaway," however, is probably "Reckouwacky," a name supposedly provided by a small tribe of Canarsie Indians meaning "the place of our own people," to differentiate it from other Indian villages.

What went on in this area before the white man stuck his expansionist foot in, is hidden in unwritten history, though it probably differed little from what other Indians did in surrounding areas. The Canarsie Indians were part of the great Mohawk nation.

Earliest history records that Henry Hudson and his crew were the first white men to set eyes on the peninsula, but that was all they did set on it. In 1609, he cast anchor in the Rockaway Inlet, while he studied his maps and charts and compasses and Nature's stars in his search for a northwest passage to China.

Thirty-one years later, in 1640, the Mohegan tribe of the Mohawk nation sold the greater part of Long Island, including the Rockaways, to the Dutch. But while the Indians parted with the title, they continued to occupy the land on a rental basis paying for wheat and corn and other farm products.

* * *

The First Deed

<i>The mark of Jof. Jaman</i>	<i>The mark of D. Tackpousha</i>
<i>L.S.</i>	<i>L.S.</i>
<i>Sealed and delivered in the presence of</i>	
<i>for Baeler</i>	<i>The mark of O. Cippessim.</i>
<i>Widmuckhippon</i>	<i>The mark of + Mr. Lamer</i>
<i>W. Holland.</i>	<i>The mark of X. Rappaport</i>
	<i>The mark of J. Lotter</i>

SIGNATURES TO EARLY DEED.

... signed and sealed ...

Up to that time, few white men ventured to Rockaway, and few wanted to. It seemed all too barren to those who glimpsed its water washed shores. A few did venture in, but as marauders only. They had

The First Dealer

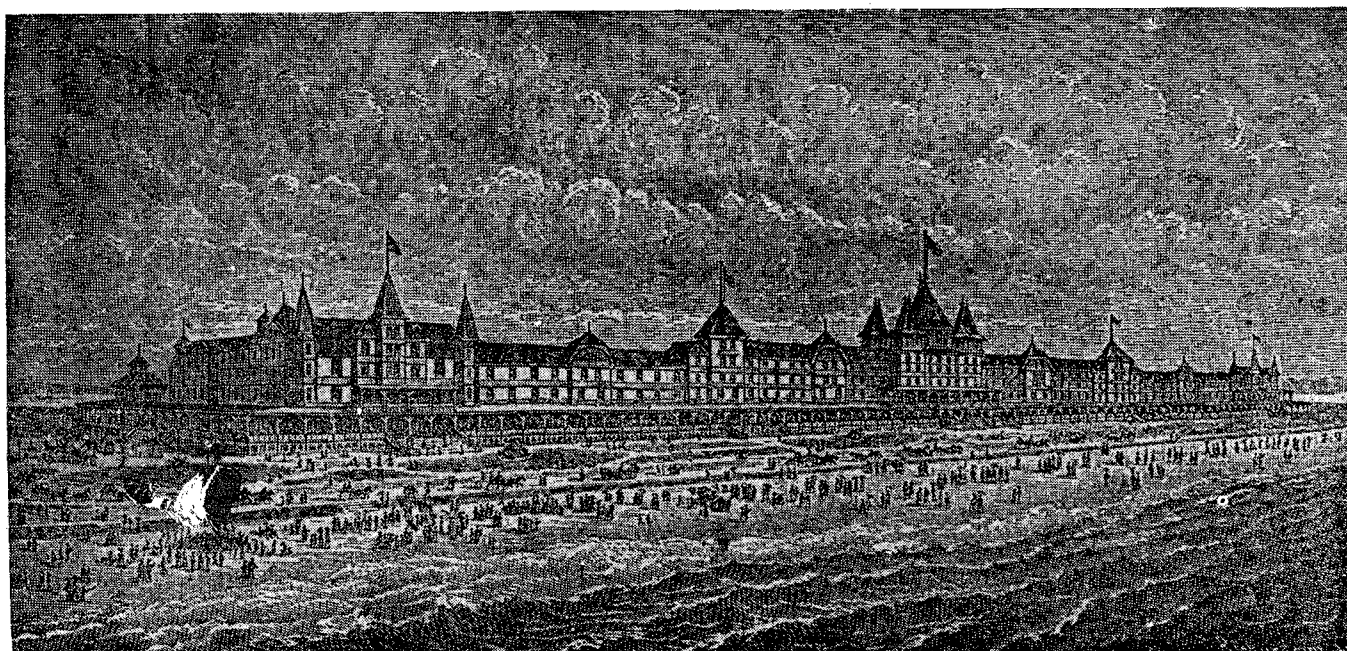


... Chief Tackapousha ...

no intention of setting up shop.

Their expeditions did lead to complaints lodged by the victimized Indians to Governor Keft at Fort

THE BIGGEST HOTEL IN THE WORLD



The Rockaway Beach Hotel ran from 116th Street to 112th Street. It had accommodations for 7,600 persons. It cost \$1,500,000. It never opened. It was torn down in 1884.



Even Then, the Big Beach Drew the Crowds!

Amsterdam in Manhattan. Incidentally, this meeting between the envoys of Chieftain Penhawitz of the Mohegan Tribe and the Dutch Governor was the first peace treaty meeting between the white and red men in the country since the Nordic invasion.

From 1642 until 1685, life between the Indians and the settlers became more friendly, although few white men had yet settled in the Rockaways.

In that year, an agreement was reached among the English Governor, Chief Tackapoucha, the tribal chieftain, and Paman, the Rockaway sachem, to sell to Captain Palmer the narrow neck of land, now known as the Rockaway Peninsula for a trifle more than thirty-one pounds sterling—or about \$150.

The deed was drawn up on October 6, 1685, conveying to Palmer "hole of that tract of Rockaway neck and beach extending from a line on the west, known as Wells Line, not far from the (Rockaway) turnpike to the point of the beach on the west at the inlet of Jamaica Bay."

* * *

This westerly point, in those days, was at that part of the Peninsula now known as the Wavecrest section, so Palmer wasn't getting a big a bargain as first figured. Today, of course, the point of beach is

Rockaway Point, some seven miles distant. The addition of this land owes partly to vast fill-in projects and partly to the action of ocean tides.

* * *

Incidentally, the transaction noted above smelled as far off as England. It resulted in a stenchy political scandal with formal charges being brought against the English Governor who sanctioned the transaction and finally ended in his removal from office by the English King.

The English King okayed the sale anyway, and Palmer emerged with the deed or warrant or grant on November 3, 1685. His worries weren't over; however, for the town of Hempstead decided Tackapoucha sold what he didn't own, and took it to the courts. The courts turned down Hempstead's claim, however, and a somewhat beaten Captain Palmer decided he'd had enough. He sold the deed to Richard Cornell, an iron master of Flushing on August 23, 1687. No price is mentioned in the deed, and it's probable that Palmer received some Little Neck property in exchange for his "white elephant."

* * *

Richard Cornell, the new owner, was born in the county of Essex, England, in 1625. He came to America with his parents and settled at

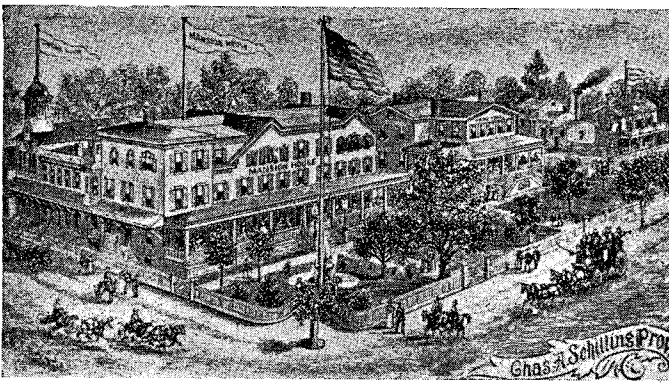
Cornbury, Flushing, where he purchased, in 1684, all the land that made up the original village of Flushing. He purchased Flushing from, of all people, Chief Tackapoucha, who apparently had his finger in a lot of real estate pies, and was building up a small fortune from his deals with the white men.

Cornell settled in the Rockaways with his family in 1690, in possibly the first real homestead to be built on the Peninsula. The Cornell home was situated just off Central Avenue overlooking the ocean. It was demolished in 1833 to make way for the Marine Pavilion.

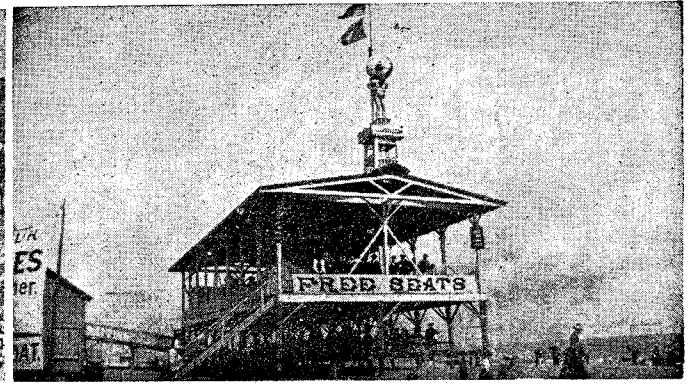
With his wife, five sons and three daughters, Cornell developed his homestead and his farm. Shortly before he died, he made a will bequeathing the Rockaway property to his family, with the exception of his oldest son, Richard, who had received a number of large tracts of land during the life of the father.

* * *

The property has passed through the various hands of the descendants of the first settler by marriage and intermarriage. Some of the names of Cornell descendants are John Lawrence, John Washburn, William Creed, Richard Betts, Miriam Mott, Joseph Doughty, John Carman, Nicholas Stillman, Thomas Hicks, Elizabeth Smith, Hannah Van Wyck, Abigail Whitehead, Patience



The Morrison House in Far Rockaway, now the site of Brody's, the RKO Columbia. The original building was destroyed by fire in 1892.



John J. Curley's Pavilion in 1887 at the foot of 102nd Street and the ocean. It was later the site of Phillips Dance Pavilion.

Oakley, James Denton, James Stingham, Jonathan Hazard, Henry Foster, Abigail Eldred, Elizabeth Abrams, Daniel Waters and Margaret Hicks.

* * *

The art of surveying in those early days was abstract; and so there were lots of disputes over who owned how much land. It got so hectic that in 1809, the Cornell Partition Suit was initiated in the Queens Court of Common Pleas to determine where one owner's land began and another's ended. Nothing definite resulted from this litigation and although another similar action was started in 1878, no lines or fixed boundaries of properties were made in the Rockaways until the heirs and owners through their attorneys agreed upon a certain line from which all other surveys were to be and have since been made. As a result of the Cornell Partition Suit, the Rockaway tracts, which then extended as far as Beach 119th Street, were divided among William Cornell, Ruliff Duryea, Henry Mott, Alice Mott, John Cornaga, Thomas and Rachel Bannister, John Cornell, Nathaniel Ryder, John Mott, John Nostrand, John Abrams and James Abrams.

* * *

In 1814, the large tract of land upon which the present Fort Tilden at Rockaway Point is located was sold to the United States Government by Nathaniel Ryder for the sum of one hundred dollars. Upon this site the government erected a Block House which was known as Fort Decatur. Shortly thereafter, the State of New York purchased the tract from the United States for the sum of one hundred dollars.

The old Block House was razed in 1818, and some 34 years later the United States Government leased the tract to Aaron A. DeGrauw at a rental of a dollar a year, despite the fact that at the time the title of the property was vested with the State of New York. This grant by the Federal Government has caused much confusion as to the ownership of the land. In 1916, when it appeared that the United States would enter the first World War, the federal government hastily took over the land and erected Fort Tilden.

* * *

A word now about the Marine Pavilion—which was built on the site of the Cornell homestead. An early history of the Peninsula related that the Pavilion was “a large and splendid edifice standing upon the margin of the Atlantic and has hitherto been kept in a style not excelled by any hotel in the Union.”

The building had a frontage of 230 feet and two wings one of which was 75 feet long, the other 45 feet long.

It was erected at a cost of \$43,000, and later sold to Stephen Whitney and Charles A. Davis for \$30,000.

It was a meeting place for great men of the day: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington Irving, among others.

On June 25, 1864, however, the Marine Pavilion was destroyed by fire—the destroyer which has haunted the Peninsula periodically over the years.

* * *

During the earliest periods of Rockaways' development, the development was leisurely despite the promise inherent in the area. The

reason for this, of course, was that transportation facilities were limited to horse-drawn carriages and horses.

It is known that a stage coach did connect with the Rockaways in 1830. This advertisement appeared in the Long Island Telegraph that year:

“The Hempstead Stage leaves the village of Hempstead, starting from the house of Davis Bedell, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning at eight o'clock, and returns on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, leaving the house of Coe S. Downing, Brooklyn, at precisely 2 o'clock p. m. Arrangement is made to carry passengers to and from Rockaway by the above line . . . Curtis and Mervin, Proprietors.”

It was the advent of the Railroad, however, which quickly built up the Rockaways, and it is a fact that many of the houses on the Peninsula today date from the boom the Railroad precipitated.

A scheme to construct a steam railroad to Rockaway was launched as early as 1833, four routes being surveyed and estimates obtained. The accepted estimate for the Rockaway Branch for a single track was placed at \$110,000, but up to the year 1868, the line had been constructed only as far as Valley Stream. In that year, the South Side Rail Road started construction work on a branch line from Valley Stream and completed the road to Far Rockaway the following year, under the charter of the Far Rockaway Branch Railroad. The trains were, of course, drawn by steam locomotives. In 1872 the same company extended the line by constructing the “Rockaway Rail-

A First School



... now the 100th police precinct site ...

way" from Far Rockaway, along the oceanfront after leaving Wave Crest, to the Neptune House at Rockaway Beach, a distance of four miles.

Another line, known as the Springfield "cutoff," was built in 1873 by the Long Island Rail Road Company from Rockaway Junction . . . Hillside . . . by way of Springfield Junction. This line entered the Rockaways at Cedarhurst.

Further railroad development in the Rockaways was closely tied up with the growth of and interest in Rockaway Beach.

The idea of connecting Rockaway Beach with Brooklyn by a road across Jamaica Bay was then conceived, and in 1880, the present trestle across the Bay was built. The operation of this route had a good deal to do with the eventual development of the West End of the Peninsula.

During the period of Rockaway Beach development, an amusement area took shape in the Seaside area. Even in those days families from New York would come to the Rockaways for the day. A great fire occurred at Seaside on September 20, 1892, when a large part of the main section, including all buildings, from ocean to bay, were destroyed. The fire occurred after the close of the season's business, but its effects were most disastrous. The damage was estimated at half a million dollars.

In the following year, however, the section was rebuilt, and many more places of entertainment and amusement soon sprang up. An elevated ocean front boardwalk from Holland to Seaside was erected, and

served as another great attraction of the area.

On July 1, 1897, the Village of Rockaway Beach, Queens was incorporated, but it didn't have a long life. It was absorbed in the City of Greater New York on January 1, 1898, with the rest of the Rockaways. Far Rockaway and environs had been part of the town of Hempstead until 1888, when it was also incorporated.

Since Rockaways incorporation, a number of attempts have been made to have it secede from the City of New York, but all have met with failure. The late William Soper Pettit was one of the leaders in this movement.

Despite the fact that there are a number of impressive arguments on the side of secession, it is very doubtful if the Rockaways would be as developed as it is today if it were not part of the City of New York.

With the advent of newer, improved transportation services, the Rockaways, since the turn of the century, gradually evolved into the Playground of New York City. Among the milestones of its development was the coming of the Cross Bay Bridge in 1925, the development of the Beach and Boardwalk in 1930, the Marine Parkway Bridge in 1937 and the elimination of the Long Island Railroad grade crossings in 1941. The accessibility via all means of transportation, and especially bus service, enhanced the development of the community.

In 1930, the United States census recorded the population of the Rockaways as 30,000 year 'round residents. By 1950, this total grew to 50,000; in 1960 it was 79,000, and the population today is estimated at 85,000. As a result of this population influx, the largest industry in the community has become new home building. At the turn of the century there were less than six apartment houses standing in the Rockaways. Today over 200 apartment residences dot the Rockaway landscape, with over 100 representing large scale housing developments. Though many apartment house residences have been constructed, the area still retains the character of a one-family home community.

With this phenomenal growth has come increased municipal services to the area. New schools have been

built and more are planned to meet the increasing needs. Additions to existing schools are also being planned in many areas. Before 1900, two Public Schools served the Rockaways. Today there are twelve Public Schools and six Parochial Schools. Also, increased attention is being paid to the growing recreational needs. In addition to existing facilities, three large parks — O'Donohue, Breezy Point Bayswater and Edgemere — are presently being developed or are in the planning stages. The other increasing City services have been in the realm of municipal parking development, new sewers, highway maintenance and construction, improved street lighting, and more local services by the Police, Fire and Sanitation Departments.

With the growth of the community, private business establishments have also flourished. The changing character of the Rockaways is also reflected in the changes taking place in the main shopping areas and in the industrial and manufacturing zones. Previously there were only small business operations, now many large chain stores have located in the community.

Much of this growth can be attributed to one major factor—Transportation. Rockaway first came into its own prior to 1925, when the Cross Bay Bridge was erected. Before this time the only way a person could gain access to the community was by ferry, the Long Island Railroad or to travel by car through Valley Stream and Nassau County into the Rockaways. When the Long Island Railroad operated, it ran along the streets until 1914, when the overhead tracks were built. The railroad ceased its operation over Jamaica Bay to the Rockaways when the trestle burned in 1954. In 1955-1956, rapid transit subway service to the Peninsula was started. This was instituted with the purchase of the Long Island Railroad trestle and right-of-way the adaptation of these facilities for subway usage.

"Playground of the City of New York," that's the Rockaways of today and yesterday for the comfortable suburbanite who weathers cold winters and for the summer invader as well—white sandy beaches, Riis Park, amusements for young and old, sports, recreation and suburban homes and summer cottages—all one community of the greatest city in the world—New York.