The Guide For Chamber Publication

[Possibly written by Clinton Metz, Village Historian; circa 1965]

Why did our village improve so fast, as the 19th century neared its close, that more city people were attracted here than to any other place on the South Shore?

Until 1892 three separate communities occupied what today is Freeport. Most houses stood on Main Street, plus others within about three blocks east or west of Freeport Creek. The other two combined villages were Coe’s Neck, to the west around South Bayview Avenue, and Milburn straddling the Baldwin boundary. Since all roads to the bayfront passed through the Incorporated Village of Freeport, it alone could annex the waterfront – and it did.

When the inhabitants of old Freeport, Coe’s Neck and Milburn voted on incorporating the territory in 1892 they favored that proposal by 214 to 132, which many folks considered the wisest choice they could have made at the best possible time.

Just 25 years earlier a Southside Railroad train had chug-chugged from Jamaica to this place, putting an end to our isolation. Newcomers started trickling in – first summer residents, then commuters, finally merchants and craftsmen.

It didn’t take long before several unoccupied woodland spots and precious waterfront sections were developed. Incorporation not only brought home rule; it also spurred the emergence of leaders.

High caliber man, natives as well as new residents from Brooklyn, Manhattan and Long Island streamed in. Even to Canada news spread about the advantages of either residing or building a career in Freeport – like, for example, George Wallace who rose to Mayor, Hempstead Town Supervisor, Assemblyman and publisher of the influential South Side Observer, and William Foreman, owner of a prosperous lumber business on Main Street at Atlantic Avenue.

Two Long Islanders, sons of farmers near Middle Island, Brookhaven Town, L.I., played chief roles in developing this area after acquiring experience in Greepoint, Brooklyn. Coming here in the mid-‘80s, John J. Randall Sr. and William G. Miller opened their first subdivision northwest of Main Street and Brooklyn Avenue close to the station. Besides updating Freeport they changed the geography of streams and lowlands near the bayfront after having subdivided upland areas.

Dredges were put to work digging canals at great expense. Like magic, underwater silt pumped into nearby lowlands created ground-level homes sites. Woodcleft Canal (1898), Randal Bay (1909) and other new waterways helped make Freeport “Boating and Fishing Capital of the East.”
Carman Cornelius, 71, a former Supervisor of Hempstead Town, was elected first Village President (Mayor). His governmental experience enabled the village to get off on a good start. Because of failing health he did not seek a second term in 1893. William G. Miller, nominated to succeed him, won election each year until 1900. His administration’s achievements included public watersupply, a fire department, power plant and road improvements. Like his partner Randall he spent the rest of a busy lifetime in Freeport.

Excellent schools didn’t just happen; ingenious Boards of Education solved tough problems. When a fire in January 1893 destroyed the community’s only elementary school it severely jolted the system. But officials managed to rent or borrow temporary classrooms, etc., so that within two weeks all the students resumed their education. Immediately the board exchanged its old burned-out school site for larger grounds diagonally opposite, at the southeast corner of Pine and Grove Streets.

Voters at a special meeting approved the spending of $300,000 on a new school, the higher of two optional sums because it included the best available ventilation system.

At first the larger building seemed more than adequate; however, classrooms proved too few. “Academic classes” – the nucleus for a separate high school – forced the district to enlarge its only elementary school/academic department structure in the late ’90s. Before long the fast-growing number of upper class students created urgent need for a separate high school building.

Three different sites proposed by the board failed to win approval by the voters in polls spanning about two decades.

Clear thinking solved the problem. A Board of Education headed by David Sutherland, knowing that parents wanted a school within reasonable distance of their homes, saw possibilities in a private cemetery on Pine Street just west of the elementary/academic school. In the poll that followed, citizens gave overwhelming support, 387 – 115, to the Pine Street site. Accordingly the district financed removal of about 1,000 bodies from the burial grounds to Greenfield Cemetery, Hempstead.

With the building completed in 1924, money for District 9 was earned by its new high school. Fast-growing unincorporated villages in the region, particularly those east of Freeport, had been unable to build educational facilities rapidly enough, so they gladly paid tuition for enrolling pupils here. By the same token, merchants on South Main Street attracted shoppers from places as distant as Amityville or thereabouts. Furthermore, an incinerator on Albany Avenue burned neighboring towns’ garbage for a fee, reducing our taxes.

Electricity was used only for street lighting (24 lamps) from dusk till midnight when Power Plant 1 went into operation April 12, 1898 in part of an already-running water plant four years old. In a 1912 referendum the voters rejected all-night street lights, but the illumination was turned on in case of fire or when requested by police. Since the ’70s our electricity system
has received from the St. Lawrence River area upstate hydroelectric power which is cheaper than energy generated with fuel oil. As a municipal plant capable of serving other communities that need power in emergencies, Freeport qualifies for the upstate current.

Popularity of the village soared in 1909 when an East River tunnel was completed. Without ferry connections, Long Island trains began running directly into Penn Station, Manhattan – a much faster route. This blessing fortunately offset a decline of Freeport’s oyster industry, hard hit by (1) pollution in the bay, (2) loss of fresh water flow from upland streams, causing too much saltiness, and (3) a reduction of microscopic food which fresh water had formerly supplied to oysters.

Another “plus” in the 20th century’s second decade was an influx of many hundreds of vaudeville actors who flocked to bungalow colonies near the waterfront. The show people formed what was called the LIGHTS Club (Long Island Good Hearted Thespians Society). Their spectacular clubhouse on Fairview Avenue sported in its immense backyard a field for many kinds of outdoor recreation. There was a private beach on the adjacent waterfront. During their nationwide travels the vaudevillians uttered valuable publicity about Freeport, on stage as well as off.

A library, started in the clothes closet of a Grove Street School principal, moved in 1924 to newly built Freeport Memorial Library at Merrick Road and Ocean Avenue. Because it is used by residents of three school districts, the Village Board agreed to pay for repairs and maintenance so that all the village’s inhabitants can use it free of charge, while the various Boards of Education provide operating expenses. Less than 30 years later its size became inadequate. Floor space was more than doubled and the library provided a large meeting hall on the second floor when a large addition in the year was dedicated in 1959.

Playland Park on nine happy acres southeast of Front and South Grove Streets in the mid-‘20s gave us a “little Coney Island.” Local businessmen had courage enough to supply the family amusement center with its huge scenic railway, whip, carnival-like booths, etc., plus swimming. Herman Barasch, a leading organizer, was treasurer. Unpredictable opening of Jones Beach Park nearby, along with the Great Depression, ended its career.

Municipal stadium activities brought fun to people of all ages. It’s ideal athletic field with a concrete viewing stand for spectators and plenty of room for expansion was opened in 1931 on filled-in meadowland between Albany and Buffalo Avenues. This innovative center was made possible by cooperation between the village and school boards. The site had served as a place to dump ashes, but in 1929 its use was required for an underground pipe connecting village sewer lines with a disposal plant at the foot of Albany Avenue. Meanwhile the school board urgently needed an athletic field, so the two governing bodies contributed toward creation of a vital pipeline connection and a field available for school sports.
Freeport’s first two railroad stations had caused heavy traffic jams almost immediately after each of them went into use. Mayor Clinton M. Flint, conscious of that fact, announced in 1944 some postwar plans for a third depot about 800 feet further east than the second one, which stood between Grove and Main Streets. Engineering designs for elimination of grade crossings the full width of our community had been approved in the ‘30s. Known as the A. Burton Cohen proposal, it became outdated because of tremendous growth not only in traffic jams but also in scarcity of auto parking spaces which would be needed after the war.

The Chamber of Commerce stood firmly in favor of a broader program drawn up by Henry J. Strecker, who had designed the State parkway system in addition to other transportation projects. Most active opponents were near the existing depot which attacked the village plan’s two percent greater cost. In 1950 Public Service Commissioner George Arkwright approved almost all of Strecker’s proposals, including a huge station plaza with many hundreds of parking spaces there or in the vicinity. He okayed “incidental changes” financed by State funds.

Civic leaders, aroused by what their leaders called “slums” in the Bennington Park section, campaigned for a crackdown on substandard housing. Village and State officials ordered a cleanup. But if families had to move out, where would they go?

Mayor William F. Glacken named Cord Viebrock chairman of a new Housing Authority whose first goal was federal aid toward a low-income housing project in the 1930s on East Merrick Road between Albany and Buffalo Avenues. Viebrock resigned from a prestigious village trusteeship so he could give enough time to his important assignment of finding homes for displaced persons in the Bennington Park area. Ground was broken August 15, 1957 for the 100 unit Moxey Rigby Apartments. The Authority also handled removal of substandard dwellings to make way largely for commercial establishments.

Homeowners’ opposition to privately owned high-rise apartments led to defeat of the incumbent Unity Party in March 1961 when voters elected the fairly new Village Party which had organized two years earlier and tested its strength by nominating and backing two candidates for Village Trusteeships. A major issue in the campaign was zoning – the village administration’s amending of an ordinance to permit a supermarket in a Business AA zone on West Merrick Road.

Two years later the Village Party won a 3 to 2 majority (Mayor Robert J. Sweeney and two trustees) on the Village Board. After the election both sides took a broadminded stance toward matters of importance like urban renewal. Let’s face it, the high-rise apartments did replace many of Freeport’s oldest dwellings. With the federally supported program under a new name, Freeport Community Development Agency, it is still active. Among the agency’s continuing goals are a rehabilitation policy in Freeport Improvement Area No. 1, homesteading (a procedure for renovation and sale of houses at bargain prices, low-interest home improvement loans and public improvements.
The Housing Authority is about 1961 opened Long Island’s first low-rent Senior Citizen apartments on Main Street south of Raynor Street, consisting of 50 units. A project twice that size was soon built north and south of the initial one.

By setting up an active Business/Industrial Committee the Mayor and Village Board get Freeport better prepared than other Nassau communities to welcome light-industry companies. Even greater results followed when the State Job Development Authority sprang into existence. Offering to pay as much as 30 percent of land and building costs incurred by firms which moved into the center, the development plan succeeded.

Inspired by this action, the Town of Hempstead in 1965 took similar steps for its land to the west along Hanse Avenue near Freeport Creek. Together, both transformations not only pay village and school taxes, lowering the burden on homeowners, but also provide numerous jobs.

Freeport has consistently faced up to its problems, large or small. It is difficult to interpret the meaning or outcome of what happened within the past 20 years. Historians need perspective that only time can give. Therefore this brief review ends here.