The Public Activities and Response to the Ku Klux Klan in Freeport, Long Island, New York, 1922-1933

Herbert Jurist
Dr. Ernst
Historiography 202
Preface:

The intent has been to show the local conditions giving rise to the Freeport Klan, its a public history and the community response. This task was made difficult by the fact that “Those who say don’t know; those who know won’t say.”¹ No one admitted to Klan membership, nor could oral testimony always suffice as to who was Klan. Thus most documentation is public. The gap of behind the scenes machinations is evident. Another obstacle was the absence of organizational records. Estimates of membership, when made, in religious or fraternal organizations, are just that.

One word is needed on classification. Class distinctions certainly existed in Freeport, but they did not seem relevant for this paper. Since the Klan classified groups according to ethnic and religious affiliations, it appeared profitable to use similar categories.

The Ku Klux Klan appears a dormant issue today. Aside from an occasional vestige of cross-burning, it seems safely locked up in the historical dust-bin. Locked up, but not eliminated would be a better assessment. An organization which made such inroads and jarred so many raw nerves of malice can not be put to rest. If the past is prologue, conditions similar to re-birth of the Klan in the 1920’s could spew forth another, possibly more sophisticated version.¹

The typical image conjured by the term Klan is mayhem, flogging and lynching. It is correct for much of the Klan in the South and in parts of the mid-West. However, it does not match with the picture that emerges of the Klan in Freeport. Aside from one “modified” kidnapping and numerous cross burnings, the Klan was quite “law-abiding.” Not withstanding, the Freeport Klan can claim its share of prejudice and verbal bigotry directed against religious and verbal bigotry directed against religious and ethnic minorities. Also, the Freeport Klan played an erratic, albeit veiled role in local politics. The story of the Freeport Ku Klux Klan and its growth is rooted in the history of this community in the 1920’s.

The greatest selling point of the Klan was the “protection of traditional American values, especially womanhood. These were to be found in the bosoms and communities of white, native-born, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, …”² The Klan was a response to the changing world of the 1920’s which saw new waves of immigration combined with the break-down of traditional mores. This helps one to account for the Freeport Klan.

By 1923 Freeport has a population of over 12,000 and was the sixth largest village on Long Island. It could boast of two trolley lines and three banks. More significantly its bays and mazes of wetlands made it an ideal location for rum-runners, nicknamed “Bottle Fishermen,” who resisted official Prohibition. Stiles, the editor of the local paper reflected the frustration of enforcing the law despite off-shore seizures of whiskey.¹ Typically, the local minister of the Methodist church stated that “Freeport has the reputation of being the worst bootlegging village on Long Island…”²

Not only bootleggers, but actors, summer transients, and sports fans viewed the village as a home and summer playground. The Lights Club, founded by Victor Moore, claimed local residents like actor Leo Carillo as members. Freeport even provided attractions similar to Coney Island. An advertisement for Freeport Playland listed “Fireworks, roller skating, dancing, mammoth swimming pool, whip, midway, Roller Coaster and Speed Boat Rides.”³ In addition prominent prize fighters squared off at the Freeport Auditorium.

² N.D.R., Oct. 28, 1927.
³ N.D.R., July 1, 1925.
Residents were not immune to the side-effects of these attractions. A protest from Grove Street (the Playland location) residents complained about the unsafe conditions due to the influx of summer residents. “It is a common thing to see women stopped and invited to take a ride, petting parties are common, …and worst of all, there is evidence of intoxication…”¹

The village seemed to have more than its share of notorious deaths and scandals. Jim Petit, a prominent hotel owner was murdered and his mistress indicted. William Creasy was accused and tried twice for murdering his girl friend, a Freeport school teacher. John Box and another resident were found guilty of violating the Mann White Slave Act in a case involving a Freeport girl.²

All of these activities and events evoked a plaintive theme reiterated by editor Stiles, a friendly “critic” of the Klan. “Is Freeport growing so fast that she is becoming citified?…will nothing rouse the residents of Freeport and other villages to rise…and say ‘Thou shalt not pass’, to the grasping hands of Manhattan?”³

In fact Freeport was burgeoning. In two months time one realty concern managed to sell 101 lots. Older residents resisted the new circumstances created by the boom and thrice voted down the sewer bond issue. The clergy succeeded in closing down the local theatres on Sunday. Persistently, the fear of

¹ N.D.R., June 27, 1925.
² N.D.R., January 8, 1923; Jan. 15, 1924; May 21, 1925.
³ N.D.R., Feb., 20, 1923.
older residents was that the past was slipping away.¹

One of the biggest threats was typified by the intrusion of factories into Freeport. On the day prior to the first public meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, the local paper's bold headline read “South Side Civic Association urges exclusion of Factories and all other Undesirable Enterprises from Freeport.”² A conflict had developed between zoning laws demanded by residents and opposition by the Chamber of Commerce. One week later the Chamber accedes to the new zoning changes. The total picture of Freeport in the 20's can be seen as that of a community undergoing changes in its traditional ways of life. With this factor in mind the Freeport Klan emerges full-blown on September 7, 1922.

The initial Klan appearance was in the form of an organizational meeting with 150 prospective members led by 7 Klan delegates. The pattern of future local Klan gatherings was set by the lack of reference to any specific local issue.

It is difficult to ascertain membership composition due to Klan secrecy. The common conception was that membership was made up of clam diggers, or as one wag put it “Klan Diggers.”³ Membership was middle class but spanned the white Anglo-Saxon community. Besides an oyster man, the Klan sported at least one electrician, builder, ice man, druggist, shellac businessman, grocer, Long Island Railroad worker, railway express employee as well as a Reverend. In government employ there were four county workers, one village attorney and one member of the Board of Trustees. Their motives for joining can be even harder to plum. Aside from the general conditions of Freeport at the time, the

---

1 N.D.R., March 26 1923; December 27, 1923; July 25, 1923.
2 N.D.R., September 7, 1922.
Klan fulfilled a social function. There were annual Klan carnivals, open air meetings, charitable activities and even funerals. The Klan gave members an identity. Wizards, dragons, titans, cyclopes with appropriate insignias was a great ego booster to threatened natives. Ritual proved to be a main attraction at Klan get-togethers. In its hey day Klan Glee Clubs, christenings and weddings were part of the agenda.¹ A Klan carnival, if nothing else, was a “great outing.” How often could one see three large red K’s in electric lights, eat corn from a boiling pot and watch a colorful parade?²

A major topic of the first Klan meeting was a re-hash of the Protocols of Zion Canard; namely that Jews controlled the press, 90% of the motion pictures, the New York Stock Exchange, and for good measure prevented the showing of the Merchant of Venice.³ Any doubts that the Klan was zeroing in only on the Jews was dispelled by an editorial pointing out that prior to the reporter’s appearance, Catholics and Negroes were also denounced.⁴

The first overt acts of Freeport Klan involved the old perennial favorite of cross burning. Despite the cross as a Klan calling card, local editorial guilelessly

---

¹ N.D.R., April 28, 1924.
² N.D.R., Sept. 20, 1924; Frederic B. Ferrar, Vice President of Creamer, Woodward, etc., New York City. Parents attended Klan meetings, personal interview with the author at Adelphi University, Garden City, Dec. 8, 1970.
³ [missing footnote]
⁴ N.D.R., Sept. 8, 1922.
questioned whether or not the burnings may have been “a Christmas cross and holiday message to Freeport.”¹ The 1923 scenario for cross burning involved the emergence from cars of shadowy figures, implantation of a cross wrapped in burlap, and immediate fade-out into the night like some silent film. The prime purpose seemed to be pre-electronic advertising. At times the cross would be burnt as a protest for a Negro gathering or as a celebration of a patriotic holiday.² The Klan seemed to have taken to heart the sympathetic admonitions of the local editor who noted the paradox of the Klan’s claim to being law-abiding, yet “call(s) out the Fire Department at midnight in a blinding snow storm to put out a fiery cross?”³ At the next big cross burning the Klan considerately forewarned the Fire Department.

As the Klan grew not only in Freeport, but on Long Island, larger outdoor gatherings became the norm. Meetings would include initiation of members, the singing of “Onward Christian Soldiers” and an address by a Reverend who would “bad mouth” all opposition. The first such meeting sponsored by the Freeport Klan was held in near-by Wantagh. It attracted 10-15 thousand and initiated 300 into the Klan rituals.⁴

¹ N.D.R., Dec. 26, 1922.  
³ N.D.R., Feb. 16, 1923.  
The first Klan meeting in Freeport itself included four days of entertainment for the Sick and Relief Fund of the Freeport Klan. ¹ Although all such meetings concluded with the usual cross burning, the local Klan was trying to face-lift the public relations image. Aside from the charitable nature of the public meeting, in the summer it sent $50 to a bereaved widow which impressed the reporter with its sincerity. ² That same day it offered ten thousand cigarettes to the Legion Post. It even donated money to the Negro Community Center. ³

Freeport Klan #10 grew rapidly in 1924 as witness the elaborate preparations for a meeting and parade where thirty thousand were present. Announcements were sent by leaflets dropped from a plane. On a field west of the village, the Klan had its own lighting plant. Booths displayed Klan regalia for sale. There was an absence of “vilification.” The theme was the small-town cry for restoration of womanhood and the goal, women’s right to stroll without “hearing lewd things said about her.” ⁴

The “philosophy” propounded at all these Klan gatherings amounted to variations on the theme of “100% Americanism.” This phrase was not a monopoly of the Klan. In fact every local speaker from public officials to members of fraternal organizations, like the American Legion, sprinkled their speeches with it. ⁵ The consciousness and defensiveness growing out of the W.W.I were very much a part of the 1920’s. The Klan’s point was that only Anglo-Saxon Protestants were “100%.” Despite the Freeport Klan’s original

¹ N.D.R., Nov. 28, 1923.
² N.D.R., June 2, 1923.
³ N.D.R., June 7, 1923.
⁴ N.D.R., April 28, 1924.
⁵ N.D.R., Feb. 20 1923.
attack on the Jews, there is hardly any overt mention of the Jewish community at future meetings. The Negro community was treated very paternalistically by the Klan, but was also seldom attacked. Only the Catholic community received the full ire of the Klan. This was true as well on the national level.¹

The resentment in the early 1900’s to the building of the Catholic Church was marked. The Father would cross to the rectory under a hail of rocks and tomatoes.² Such hostility was met head-on. The earliest public attack of the Klan was emitted at a Knights of Columbus (Catholic fraternal organization) communion breakfast. The lurid headlines reporting the occasion read “If the Klan Dare to Desecrate our Homes or Churches, They Will Wade Through Blood of 350 Hard Fisted God Fearing Men.” The assistant D.A. of Kings County called for a united front of “Protestant and Catholic, Jew and Gentile, black and white” against the Klan. The tone was alternatively hyperbolic and biting. One speaker rhetorically wondered if any Klan were present and “maybe we can find an undertaker at home…” Despite the united front call, another speaker couldn’t resist pointing out that the Klan can only be taken seriously when they are on a paying basis, then “… the Jews will take them over and make Issy [sic] Meyers, King Kleagle.”³

¹ Chalmers, op. cit., p. 110.
² Stephen Coffey, charter member of Freeport Knight’s of Columbus, personal interview with the author on the phone November 20, 1970.
³ N.D.R. March 26, 1923.
Klan statements and actions created the response. Parochial schools were held in complete suspicion,\(^1\) as was the whole structure and ceremonies of the church. (This was ironic given the Klan fixation on rituals). The only Klan supported candidate, in Freeport’s elections, Charles J. Shea, ran just to oppose George M. Bird, the first Catholic nominated to the Village Board of Trustees.\(^2\) Although the Catholic community was primed, the verbal fireworks never got beyond rhetoric.

The official Catholic attitude toward the Klan was “benign neglect.” “Let them have enough rope and they’ll hang themselves,” was the approach of the young and amiable Father O’Toole, pastor of the Holy Redeemer Church.\(^3\) This position was supplemented with an official boycott of Klansmen. “The iceman and the druggist found that they had no customers.”\(^4\) At times the boycott worked in support of a Catholic. A resident recalled how Protestant members of the football team threatened to walk out when there was an intent to blackball membership in the Freeport Field Club.\(^5\) Occasionally, hot-tempered Catholic youth would get physically aroused. A charter member of the Knights of Columbus jumped into the ring where a Klansmen was denouncing Catholics who “partake of blood, sinews and bones of Jesus.”\(^6\) Other times the youths have some sport and run their cars into the Klan meetings. The Rangers, Klan

---

\(^1\) N.D.R., July 16, 1925.
\(^2\) N.D.R., March 16, 1926.
\(^3\) Dr. S.D. Bird, son of George M. Bird, member of Freeport Board of Trustees in the 1920’s, personal interview with the author on the phone, November 9, 1970; Pete Kelly, Kelly’s Auto and Truck Collision Corporation, Freeport, former Republican Committeeman in Negro Community, personal interview at author’s home, November 14, 1970.
\(^4\) Pete Kelly, supra
\(^5\) IBID
\(^6\) Stephen Coffey, supra
guard, would scatter to the winds.\textsuperscript{1} The continued razzing led to the arrest of two Catholic youths for “insulting the flag” during a Klan parade.\textsuperscript{2} Father O’Toole convinced the police chief, Hartmann, considered by Catholics a Klan sympathizer, that “if he didn’t let the boys go, O’Toole would call Governor Smith, and he’d fix him.”\textsuperscript{3}

Any sign of resistance found the Klan backing down. Their bully mentality could not bear confrontation. The 1928 defeat of candidates from an “organization of intolerant persons”, i.e. the Klan, brought forth a unity meeting between prominent Protestants and the Knights of Columbus. A former Village President predicted the death rattle of the Klan.\textsuperscript{4} Prognostication of a Klan demise was not far wrong. Only the hovering specter of Al Smith in the White House fanned anti-Catholicism in 1927 and 1928. The Klan heavy artillery in the form of Dr. Hiram Evans, the Imperial Wizard, was supposed to speak on Smith’s political aspirations. He failed to appear, but a parade drew 800-2,000 and a fourteen hour Klan ritual attracted 8,000-15,000 people.\textsuperscript{5} Another meeting after Smith’s nomination was addressed by Senator Heflin of Alabama, leading Klan spokesman. A member of the Board of Trustees, John F, DeLorme, was reviled for opposing the Heflin meeting.\textsuperscript{6} One peppery, elderly lady [Mrs. George E. Barrett] stood up and said, “It’s a lie,” in,

\begin{itemize}
  \item[1] Pete Kelly, \textit{supra}.
  \item[3] Pete Kelly, \textit{supra}.
  \item[5] N.D.R., Aug. 22, 1927
\end{itemize}
regards to the claim that Catholics don’t vote their conscience.\(^1\) By 1930 the Klan was in general decline and its last parade attracted few marchers. Bird was mocked for opposing a permit for the parade. Feeble threats were made to deny him re-election. Catholics were symbolic of a foreign power – the Papacy, and domestic crime – bootlegging. Time and personal contact with Catholics ameliorated much of these fears. Dr. Bird recalled patients wary of being turned away since they had been Klansmen. They admitted how they came to know and feel affection for his father.\(^2\)

Klan response to the Jewish community was milder. The initial harangue aside, Jews were not singled out. In part they were not as visible either in a political or religious sense. There was no counter-part to Al Smith on the national scene or George Bird on the local. Not that they were absent from civic positions. In fact Harry Barash headed the Freeport Chamber of Commerce while Leo Schloss presided over the American Legion. As a group they made themselves inconspicuous. They didn’t bother the Klan and the Klan didn’t bother them.

Their response was based on their economic role in the community as well as being historically conditioned. Most of the men were merchants along Main Street. Their business depended on good relations with everyone, including the Klan. They tended to play down the Klan’s role and presence in

\(^1\) N.D.R., Aug. 3 1928; N.Y.T., July 31, 1928.
\(^2\) Dr. Bird, supra.
Freeport. Many felt that the “Klan (in Freeport) never harmed anyone.”¹ In order to survive in a potentially hostile environment, Jewish merchants advertised in Klan parades² or acknowledged the Kleagle (Klan head) as their “best customer.”³ One disagreement occurred over the Klan cup given to the firemen, but displayed in Baumann’s window. It was amicably resolved by the cup’s removal.⁴

Any resistance was surreptitious. One merchant sold black puttees and white breeches to the Klan and over-charged by switching price tags.⁵ On a personal basis there was a little evidence of hostility to Jews, or for that matter Catholics or Negroes as individuals. In one instance a Jewish dentist was even pro-offered a membership invitation by a patient; the only requirement being a “belief in Jesus.”⁶ One incident jarred this co-existence between the Jews and the Klan.

After a few well-publicized incidents of assaults and molestations in August 1924, a committee of eight or nine robed men headed by Milford Van Riper, later a trustee, warned a Jewish druggist, Ernest Louis, to get out of town in ten days.⁷ The provocation was a Klan favorite—a “molestation” of a young girl. The stereotype of the lecherous Jew must have given the Klan quite a jar. The incident had taken place two weeks earlier. A 13 year old, Dorothy Shedlock,  

---
¹ Ralph Samet, Samet’s Dress Shop, personal interview with the author on the phone, Nov. 21, 1970; Irving Grebinar, Irving’s men shop, personal interview with the author on the phone, Dec. 6, 1970.
⁵ Ralph Samet, supra.
⁶ Mrs. Abraham Litwak, personal interview with the author on the phone, Nov. 21, 1923.
⁷ N.D.R., Sept 4, 1923.
⁸ Anonymous #1, interview with author on the phone, Nov. 15, 1970.
⁹ Dr. Mervin Schloss, Dentist, member of one of Freeport’s oldest Jewish families, interviews with the author on the phone, Nov. 27, 1970.
¹⁰ N.D.R., Aug. 15, 1924; N.Y.T., Aug. 16, 1924.
made a complaint that Louis had annoyed her. She claimed that Louis grabbed her when no one was around, and she screamed. What probably took place was Louis’ spraying some perfume on her lapel and commenting on how nice it smelled. This “molestation” was in the presence of his wife according to Louis. No one in the Jewish community really believed the charge.\(^1\) However, accusations of that nature have a way of being accepted. The warning, coupled with threatening letters for him to leave town created a demand for a court hearing even though the police had already dismissed the complaint.\(^2\) Only the wag of the Nassau Daily Review, Cecil Johnson, offered the comment that “soon now that (KKK) will be ordering the trees to leave.”\(^3\)

The threats reached their climax with a kidnapping by three men and two boys. Louis was taken right after closing hours, in front of his wife and brother. It was an atypical “kidnapping.” Louis was not manhandled, and a kidnapper, who used a “vile” name was rebuked by one of the five. Also, Louis was offered movey to tide him over. “Polite” kidnapping or not it had its desired affect.\(^4\)

Synonymously with Louis’ victimization, the grand jury indicted him for “impairing moral.” The Fire Department also accepted his guilt by suspending his membership.\(^5\) Louis eventually moved from Freeport with his entire family since

---

\(^1\) Mrs. Litwak, supra; Mrs. Frank Varmus, daughter of Harry Barash (civic and religious leader), interviewed by the author on the phone, Nov. 21, 1970; anonymous #4, interviewed by the author on the phone, Dec. 12, 1970.

\(^2\) N.D.R., Aug. 20, 1924; N.D.R., Aug. 15,1924.

\(^3\) N.D.R., Aug. 23, 1924.

\(^4\) N.D.R., Aug. 27, 1924; N.Y.T., Aug. 28, 1924.

\(^5\) N.D.R., Aug. 27, 1924; N.D.R., Aug. 29, 1924.
“business (had) been ruined…”¹ Selling his business and moving did not end his problems. After two trials he was found guilty and sentenced to ninety days.²

Even though the Klan officially repudiated the kidnapping and “threatened” to expel members involved, the case figured in their next parade. At this time the Klan was at its apogee. It held the first open-air meeting for women and had a very large parade. One of the floats entitled “We Protect American Womenhood” showed a figure getting out of a window of a store and leering at a little girl surrounded by protective Klansmen. The sign over the door read “N. Ticer, Druggist.” During the rally, Rev. Haywood, a New York Klan spokesman, disassociated the Klan from any attempts to warn or kidnap “a Jewish druggist out of town.”³

No protests, public or otherwise, followed the Louis case. The editorials in the Nassau Daily Review were silent. Ironically, an editorial after the kidnapping was entitled “Save the Trees.” Some in the Jewish community believed it better not to overreact. Others certainly felt uneasy about the Louis case.⁴ One resident remembered a letter received by her husband, a prominent official in Temple, B’Nai Israel, right after the Louis case. A non-Jewish organist working for the Temple was discharged, and immediately afterward a letter threatening the “Louis Treatment” was delivered to her husband. Nothing more came of the letter

¹ N.D.R., Sept. 5, 1924; N.Y.T., Sept. 5, 1924
² [illegible]
³ N.D.R., Sept. 22, 1924.
⁴ Mrs. Litwake, supra; Mrs. Frank Varmus, supra.
but the impact had been made. Jews believed that their first obligation was to their family and nothing should jeopardize this.

Silence has its limits, no matter what the situation. Two months later the Klan was confident enough to present an inscribed flagpole to the Freeport High School. An elaborate program with vocal and instrumental solos was set aside for the ceremony. A Klanswoman and a Klansman openly made the presentation, and the President of the Board, Edward Tree, graciously accepted. He acknowledged that the Americanism principles expressed by the speakers were the same as those of the Board of Education. The Klan was now delving into the realm of education. Temple B’nai Israel registered an open protest to acceptance of a gift from such a bigoted organization. Their ally on this issue was the Knights of Columbus.

An imbroglio developed. The Odd Fellows, men and women's branches, supported the gift. The Junior Order of American Mechanics, a welfare organization of craftsmen, which often sponsored Klan functions, presented a flag for the pole. The "crisis" ended when somehow, sometime later, the Klan inscription was secreted away.

The philosophy of the Freeport Jews could be exemplified in the statement of a famous and outspoken national Jewish statesman, Louis Marshall. The Klan should not be taken "too seriously or tragically, but with patience and a sense of proportion." The Klan disappeared and the Jewish community remained. The

---

1 Anonymous #4, supra.
3 N.D.R., Nov. 4, 1924; N.Y.T., Nov. 5, 1924.
days of protest to bigotry were a long way off. It took a Depression, a Holocaust, and a civil rights movement to eliminate "silence" from many people's vocabularies, no matter how small the affront. This was as true for the Negroes as for the Jews.

The Negro community in the 1920's was far less assertive than any other segment of the village. The common attitude was "wait and see." As long as the Klan didn't bother them, they wouldn't bother the Klan.¹ Survival was such a struggle that any other attitude was foolhardy. Although many Negroes in the 20's were businessmen, such as contractors, plasterers and store owners, many more were laborers and domestics.²

Two things made the Klan hostile when it came to Negroes--independent political action and the threat of "mixing." An early cross burning occurred outside a meeting called for Negro representation in village government and on school boards.³ The spokesman for the meeting was John Robinson, a deacon of the Second Baptist Church in Freeport and editor of New Amsterdam Daily News. He made the first attack on the Klan for being anti-Negro, anti-Catholic, and anti-Jewish. He especially singled out the conspiracy to deny Negroes real estate in Northern Freeport.⁴

The Klan spewed paternalism when dealing with Negroes. It gave $50 for a community center and Robinson promised to "acknowledge with thanks the gift

¹ Pastor wright, Bethel AME Zion Church, N.D.R., April 3, 1923 Stanley Chambers, early member of Bethel AME Zion Church, former businessman, personal interview with author at Chambers home in Freeport, Nov. 27, 1970.
² Chambers, supra.
³ N.D.R., Feb. 13, 1923.
⁴ N.D.R., Sept. 16, 1923.
from the generous and public spirited Klanmen."¹ The most publicized gift involved a presentation of $400 to the Bethel AME Zion Church. The Reverend Stiles pointed out that the whites now complaining about the mixing of races forgot that they began the practice. He then went on to agree with the Klan on intermarriage since "a barrel of flour will never make a colored woman white..." He even rebuked "'colored voters who supported anti-Klan candidates in the last election.'"² The $400 was dramatically folded to represent three K's and accepted as an aid to self-help. Out of necessity the Negroes were eager to take the Klan's offer of assistance at face value. It made far more sense than needless confrontation. There were some who objected to Klan presence, but "you always have some protesting."³

The Freeport Klan #10 had the dubious distinction of being the first state local to go on record for a law against intermarriage in New York State. The Nassau Daily Review editorial echoed the wide spread feeling of the time that laws were not as effective as "an unwritten rule of race loyalty."⁴

The Klan's policy of exclusion put severe limitations on recruitment. Once Catholics, Jews and Negroes were crossed off, the only potential source of members was White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Here Local #10 could claim some success.

The national pattern was to approach a local Protestant minister, give him free membership (by-passing the $10 initiation fee), and either urge him to be a

---

¹ N.D.R., Jan. 21, 1923.
² N.D.R., March 30, 1925; Chambers, supra.
³ Chambers, supra.
⁴ N.D.R., Oct 9, 1929, Oct. 11, 1929.
Klan Chaplain or some high officer.\textsuperscript{1} This technique was in part successful in Freeport as well.

An early defender of the Klan was Reverend Walter Thompson, pastor of the M.E. Church. One sermon was sprinkled with all the standard Klanisms. The exclusivity of the Klan was defended by referring to separate societies of Jews, Catholics, and Negroes for which "a Protestant Gentile, white man is not eligible..." Thompson went on to point out that the Klan was pro-American not anti-Jewish. "...I believe that the Klan simply feels that he (the Jew) would be uncomfortable as a member..."\textsuperscript{2} There was no evidence of Thompson's membership in the Klan, but his sympathies, although transient, were obvious.

Pastor Dennett of the First Baptist Church repeated the same thoughts. The Klan "...' believes in white supremacy, but who doesn't..."\textsuperscript{3} The Klan at this stage left a strong impact on Protestant resident. Strident patriotism, defense of women, support for traditional values of Bible and morality were very much in vogue. The editor of the local paper struck up the old tune for halting the "invasion" of Freeport in an editorial entitled "the Need of a Klan."\textsuperscript{4} However, with one exception, nothing this blatant re-appeared from the Freeport pulpit or press. A year later the paper was warning of the "appeals to bigotry" and the reference is obvious.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{1} David Chalmers, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{N.D.R.}, June 18, 1923.
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{N.D.R.}, July 2, 1923.
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{N.D.R.}, May 8, 1923.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{N.D.R.}, May 14, 1924.
The exception was the one example of home-grown talent produced by Local #10, Reverend Oswald, minister of the First Presbyterian church. After his fall, the Klan had to resort to importation of outside "dignitaries."

Oswald's talent lay in an ability to dramatize. He was renowned in his church as a "good talker." The reverend's public debut was staged during an invitation for friends and enemies of the Klan to attend services. The "service" was a tremendous success with 600 present and an overflow crowd. The Church gleaned at least 25 new members. That same year the technique was used again. The sermon was entitled, "Has the K.K.K. a right to organize in the State of New York?" Thirty-five Knights attended without masks and in full regalia, along with a packed audience.

In addition to servicing his own church, he spoke at neighboring Bellmore sprinkling his talk with homilies like, "Those people who best love the Klan, know it best." At a large Klan Carnival in Freeport, he tactfully denounced "prejudice." However his swan song came after a strong attack on the Roman Catholic Church and parochial schools.

A split had developed within the Presbyterian Church. One faction demanded his resignation and appealed to the Long Island Presbytery Committee. At a tense local meeting Oswald temporarily routed his opposition. He admitted membership in the Klan. The justification was that it increased

---

1 Albert Banefield, early member of First Presbyterian Church, interview with author on the phone, Nov. 23, 1970.
3 N.D.R., Aug. 19, 1924, July 17, 1925, Sept. 28, 1925.
church membership. Furthermore, he claimed that "One of the leading elders, at least four of the trustees, and six deacons (were) Klansmen..."

The dissidents challenged his mismanagement of money, use of a car for pleasure trips and his neglect of Church affairs. Oswald's victory vote was 147-87, but it was only temporary.¹

His departure on orders from the Long Island Presbytery² brought an immediate rededuction in church membership and attendance. Oswald had claimed that church members had increased to 621 under his tutelage. The Reverend's departure immediately reduced the congregation to 100-200 members.³

This ended the most overt Klan penetration in Freeport. The Klan as in most of the country made its gain in the ranks of the White, Anglo-Saxon community. Many rejected Klan appeals and hints of coercion.⁴ Many more found the message very appealing, at least for a while.⁵

A yardstick of Klan influence was its political impact. The most accurate assessment would be "baffling" and "tough to predict." Often, the candidate himself wasn't aware that he had been anointed by the Klan.⁶

Klan political pressure was first noted in the form of a denial. Hilbert Johnson, running for Village President, took an ad denouncing the rumor that he

¹ N.D.R., Oct. 17, 1925.
² N.D.R., Nov. 24, 1925.
³ Banefield, supra.; Bob Fillmore, early member of First Presbyterian Church, personal interview with author on the phone, Nov. 23, 1970.
⁴ Dr. Hammond, early member of Methodist Church, personal interview with the author on the phone, Nov. 27, 1970; Albert Banefield, supra.
⁶ James C. Young, op.cit.
and his slate were Klansmen. The next change was of “sweeping Klan victories” in the school elections. This school board was in power in 1924 when the Klan flag pole was awarded to the High School. Again Klan influence was proclaimed by local politicos when W. Irving Vanderpoel, a Democrat, became Village President in 1925, at the height of Klan influence.

The first and last open Klan candidate was Charles J. Shea, a builder and local Klan official. At the last minute, his write-in campaign started in opposition to George N. Bird, a Catholic seeking a place on the Board of Trustees in 1926. The campaign was exotic. On Election eve, buglers riding n cars blew their horns (a Klan device for announcing meetings borrowed from the film Birth of a Nation), and men flocked to the center of the village. "...Klansmen wearing brassards (badges) patrolled the streets and banned all who could not give a certain sign from entering the building." Others distributed Shea cards to clusters of residents. The frenzied activity was ineffective. Bird won 6-1 (1,142-200) against Shea's write-in candidacy. Everyone was surprised by the small Klan vote. Emergence into the full glare of publicity was never tried again.

The next time, Shea sought election as an independent, and no mention was made of Klan affiliation or nativism. He received 617 votes after a full campaign, but still lost to candidates who gleaned around 1800 votes.

1 N.D.R., March 19, 1923.
2 N.D.R., May 7, 1924.
3 N.D.R., March 18, 1923; N.Y.T., March 16, 18, 1925.
4 N.Y.T., March 22, 1926.
5 N.D.R., March 16, 17, 1926.
6 N.D.R., March 16, 1927; N.Y.T., March 16, 1927.
The sole political grouping approaching a Klan Party was the 1927-1928 People’s Party. Its appearance coincided with recurrent Klan activity in opposition to Al Smith’s Presidential candidacy. The Party was full of prominent Klansmen. It was labeled an “organization of intolerant persons” by a former village President, and the newspaper interpreted this as Klan.¹

People’s Party campaigns did not mention race or religion, only local issues like excessive taxes and inadequate representation for South Freeport. One of their candidates, Travis Parker, was accused of the Louis kidnapping but exonerated for lack of evidence. Parker frequently defended the Klan principle and activities in the local paper,² but never in relation to his campaign. He received 681 Votes while George M. Bird was effortlessly re-elected with a 1,261 vote plurality.³

The People’s Party hung on in 1928 but tried a new tack. Instead of running as a Party, it made an unsuccessful attempt to include members on the opposition slate. One of those proposed was Edward C. Smith, Marshall of multiple Klan parades.⁴

Total political impact was minimal compared to other places in the country. It was powerful enough to get an 11-year platform from village officials under the guise of “free speech.” Without parade permits, the public Klan gatherings would have been impossible. The phalanx of support on the Board weakened in 1930. Bird and McCloskey, both Catholics, vigorously opposed a Klan parade permit as

¹ N.D.R., March 26, 1928.
² N.D.R., Nov. 7, 1928; Oct. 29, 1929; Nov. 15, 1929; Nov. 28, 1929.
³ N.D.R., March 21, 1928.
adding to already adverse publicity for Freeport. Another trustee, William E. Crevoiserat, contended that the applicants were “entitled to their rights.”\(^1\) After a postponement, Mayor Flint cast the deciding vote for the permit.\(^2\)

For the first time a Klan event was not front page local news. The parade attracted less than 300 marchers, fractional, when compared to vintage years.\(^3\)

The end of the Freeport Klan cannot be pin-pointed with exactitude. Its last public activity was in 1933, a time when the Klan had died out everywhere else. Local #10 hosted a Klan conclave for the New York and New Jersey chapters. The parade drew 150, ironically the number that the Freeport Klan began with in 1922.

Speakers at the conclave denounced some of the old and some of the new – Tammany Hall, Mayor O’Brien of New York City, communism and nudism.\(^4\) The true measure of the meeting’s impact was the total absence of reportage in the *Nassau Daily Review*. In this light it is worthwhile to speculate to what degree the media reported or made the news.

The Freeport Klan had flourished with the aid of good salesmen\(^5\) and it died when people realized the shoddiness of the product. People saw the incongruity of self- righteous upholding of the law in the face of national Klan scandals.\(^6\) Ultimately, the Klan had no function in the altered world of the 1930’s.

---

\(^1\) *N.D.R.*. June 26, 1930; Freeport Board of Trustees #10, June 25, 1930.

\(^2\) *N.D.R.*. July 3, 1930; Freeport Board of Trustees #10, July 8?, 1930.

\(^3\) *N.D.R.*. July 21, 1930.


\(^5\) Pete Kelly, *op. cit*

\(^6\) Bob Fillmore, *op. cit*.
By 1931, the Freeport Klan defender, Travis Parker, instead of defending prejudice, was attacking those opposed to veterans’ compensation.¹ When the Klan was staging its finale, a National Recovery Administration parade completely pushed Klan news aside. The N.R.A. parade was led by Harry Barash as a concerted effort of employers, employees, and consumers to combat the Depression.² The Klan was irrelevant. Few could afford “exclusiveness,” since all were leveled by the end of prosperity. An old Klan harasser and Republican committeeman, recalled giving out jobs to everyone – Klan and non-Klan. When fifty men applied for three-day-a-week job at fifty cents an hour, ethnic or religious differences were unimportant.³

Other issues, like Prohibition passed into oblivion with scarcely a murmur of protest. In 1930, a newspaper poll revealed overwhelming sentiment for repeal.⁴ Freeport in the 1930’s had become the cosmopolitan village that natives had resisted. There was little to fight any longer, since new mores had caught up with the changing social conditions.

It is not possible to fully calculate what effect the Klan had on Freeport. Many recalled laughing at Klan mustache disguises or jeering at familiar feet jutting indiscreetly from sheets.⁵ Many more were still reluctant to discuss or even acknowledge the Klan’s existence.

¹ N.D.R., February 20, 1923.
² N.D.R., September 6, 1933.
³ Pete Kelly, op. cit.
⁴ N.D.R.
Bibliography

Secondary Works

A) Books


Primary Works

A) Newspapers

1) Nassau Daily Review, 2 December 1922- 8 September 1933.

A Daily paper which featured Freeport news. The editor never repudiated the local Klan news nor (with one exception) defended it. However, editorial policy did mar reportage. The paper published critical letters, speeches, and comments emanating from religious and ethnic organizations.


The paper kept track of most of the public activities of the Freeport Klan. Most of the news was buried on back pages, but coverage was accurate.

B) Oral Interviews

1) Banefield, Albert, early member of the First Presbyterian Church, interview with author on the phone, November 23, 1970.
2) Bird, Dr. S.D., son of George M. Bird, member of the Freeport Board of Trustees in the 1920's, personal interview with the author on the phone, November 9, 1970.

3) Chambers, Stanley, early member of Bethel A.M.E. Zion Church, personal interview with author at Chamber's home in Freeport, November 27, 1970.

4) Coffey, Stephen, charter member of Freeport Knights of Columbus, personal interview with the author on the phone, November 20, 1970.

5) Crevoiserat, William E., member of the Board of Trustees in the 1920's, personal interview with the author on the phone, October 31, 1970.

6) Dodd, Dr. John W., Retired Freeport Superintendent of Schools and principal of Freeport High School in the 1920's, personal interview on the phone, November 30, 1970.

7) Ferrar, Frederic B., Vice president of Creamer, Woodward, etc., New York City, parents attended Freeport Klan meetings, personal interview with the author at Adelphi University, Garden City, December 8, 1970.

8) Fillmore, Bob, early member of the First Presbyterian Church, personal interview with the author on the phone, November 23, 1970.


11) Hammond, Dr., Early member of the Methodist Church, personal interview with the author on the phone, November 27, 1970.

12) Kelly, Pete, Kelly’s Auto and Truck collision Corporation, Freeport, former Republican committeeman in the Negro community, personal interview at author’s home, November 14, 1970.

13) Iselin, Samuel, Freeport merchant, personal interview with the author on the phone, November 15, 1970.

14) Litwak, Mrs. Abraham, merchant, personal interview with the author on the phone, November 21, 1970.


16) Schloss, Dr. Mervin, Dentist, member of one of Freeport’s oldest Jewish families, interview on the phone, November 27, 1970.

17) Varmus, Mrs. Frank, daughter of Harry Barash (Jewish civic and religious leader), interview with author on the phone, November 2, 1970.

18) Anonymous #1 interview with author on the phone, November 15, 1970


C) Public Records

1) Freeport Board of Trustees minutes 1922-1933. Village Hall.