

# 1. PROFILE OF SUFFOLK COUNTY

Suffolk County comprises about 1,000 square miles of the eastern two-thirds of Long Island. Long Island itself extends 120 miles into the Atlantic Ocean, east from New York City. The distance from the Suffolk County border to Montauk Point is 86 miles. At Suffolk County's widest point, the distance from Long Island Sound to the southern shore is 26 miles. In addition to Long Island, Suffolk County includes a number of smaller, but significant islands, including Fishers Island, Shelter Island, Gardiners Island, Plum Island, and Fire Island.

Long Island was formed during the Pleistocene Era when the earth warmed and the massive glaciers then covering the area melted, leaving glacial moraines of rock and soil deposits which shaped the island. Extending back 10,000 years and up to the 17th century, the island was inhabited by numerous small groups of Algonquins having a language and culture similar to Native Americans who lived throughout the Middle Atlantic region and what is now New England. Historians estimate the native population to have been no more than 6,000. The Algonquins fished and harvested shellfish at the shore and hunted the inland wilderness. From clam shells and whelk they chiseled wampum, the currency of eastern natives and, in the 17th century, adopted as money by colonists.

Dutchman Adrian Block, the first explorer to touch land at Montauk Point in 1614, encountered Native Americans. Lion Gardiner settled in 1639 on the island between the north and south forks. Gardiners Island still bears his family name. English colonists crossed Long Island Sound from Connecticut and Massachusetts colonies, founding Southold and Southampton (1640), East Hampton (1648), Shelter Island (1652), and Setauket, in Brookhaven (1655). Dutch settlers moved eastward from Manhattan Island. In 1664 the Dutch ceded control of eastern Long Island to the English.

In the 1670s, James, Duke of York, who owned Long Island, appointed Thomas Dongan to govern it. The "Charter of Liberties and Privileges" was adopted at a gathering of colonial representatives in November 1683. This Charter established Suffolk County as a governmental entity and as one of the 12 original counties of the Province of New York. It laid the foundation for the State's present political subdivisions and governmental structure.

From the first years of colonization, the dense forests provided wood, which Long Islanders cut and shipped as cordwood and as board footage for local ship and home builders. As the land was cleared, the rich acreage was farmed. Fishing and shipbuilding were other early industries. Until the 1850s, whaling was an important source of income.

Farming remains a staple of eastern Long Island commerce, although strawberries, cabbage, potatoes, pumpkins and sod acres are giving way to vineyards and horse farms. Its quaint historic villages, rocky north shore beaches and calm waters, as well as the white sand and breakers off Fire Island and the dependable winds and safe harbors for sailing, make tourism a major Suffolk County industry. In the 1930s, the County became the site of large-scale suppliers to the U.S. defense and aerospace industries. For example, Grumman Corporation played an important role in developing high-technology jet planes, and the lunar excursion module (LEM) which first landed men on the moon in 1969. After World War II, Brookhaven National Laboratory, a

research institution, was administered by Associated Universities, and more recently by SUNY Stony Brook and Batelle. BNL is funded by the federal government to develop peaceful uses of atomic energy. It was established on the site of Camp Upton in Yaphank. High technology centers make Suffolk County sixth in the nation in the production of computer, radio and television communications equipment and aircraft manufacture, bringing skilled workers and prosperity in the 1990s.

After World War II, Long Island experienced phenomenal growth. In 1955, William Levitt introduced mass-produced housing developments. Major new institutions of learning contributed to Suffolk County's population explosion. Foremost among the latter is the State University of New York at Stony Brook, which opened on a 1000-acre campus in 1962. SUNY's Health Science Center and 18-story University Hospital became one of Long Island's tallest buildings in 1976.

Long Island's leading newspaper, *Newsday*, founded by Alicia Paterson in 1940 in Hempstead, started a Suffolk edition in 1944. The paper features investigative news coverage of local public officials and institutions, sports reporting, and coverage of world and national affairs.

## **SUFFOLK COUNTY CHARTER**

Until 1960, Suffolk County, consisting of the ten towns of Babylon, Brookhaven, East Hampton, Huntington, Islip, Riverhead, Shelter Island, Smithtown, Southampton, and Southold, was governed by a Board of Supervisors, with each town represented by its elected supervisor. This Board was responsible for County business, and each supervisor was accountable for the affairs of his individual town government. In 1954, the Board of Supervisors appointed a committee to study alternative forms of government for the rapidly growing County. After several attempts to write a charter in 1956 and 1957 proved unsatisfactory, a group of citizens formed the Suffolk County Citizens Charter Committee in the summer of 1957. The document they drafted became the basis for the charter approved by the voters of Suffolk County in 1958. Approval by the New York State Legislature followed, and the Charter went into effect on 1 January, 1960.

The 1960 Charter provided for a new administrative officer, the County Executive, while retaining the Board of Supervisors as the legislative body. County administration was centralized and streamlined, and a County police department was created.

In 1967, the Board of Supervisors enacted resolutions establishing the Suffolk County Charter Revision Commission, a group of private citizens appointed by the presiding officer of the Board of Supervisors and the County Executive. They were to update the charter so that it would meet the needs of the rapidly expanding County more efficiently. In 1968 the U.S. Supreme Court mandated that the one-man, one-vote principle be applied to County government. Therefore, the Charter Revision Commission proposed the apportionment of the County into 18 districts of equal population, and the election of one representative from each of the districts to constitute the County Legislature, replacing the Board of Supervisors. Other important revisions accepted by the voters in 1970 included delineated and separated functions of the County Legislature and County Executive and changes in the budget and capital programs. With voter approval of the Environmental Preservation Act in 1970, it became the County's basic policy to conserve and protect its natural resources, the quality of its environment, and its natural scenic beauty, to

encourage conservation of its agricultural lands, and to acquire land and waters for the County nature preserves and Historic Trust. Amendments in 1976 and subsequent years have updated this act.

In 1972, voters approved an amendment that gave the County Planning Department the power to review and approve or deny changes, variances, special permits or subdivision plans on property within 500 feet of the shoreline.

In addition to those Amendments, every Local Law that is passed becomes part of the Charter. The *Laws of Suffolk County* include the Charter, Administrative Code, Local Laws, Acts, Resolutions, Rules and Regulations, and Codes. Copies of the updated Suffolk County Charter are placed in all public libraries in the County.

## **TABLE 1.1**

### **SUFFOLK COUNTY TIMELINE**

1665 “Hempstead Convention” combines Long Island and Staten Island into a shire, called Yorkshire, thus ending Connecticut’s jurisdiction over the area.

1683 Suffolk County is organized as one of the 12 original counties in the Province of New York.

1683 Suffolk County towns send representatives to the first Provincial Assembly, which adopts the “Charter of Liberties and Privileges,” laying the foundation for the State’s present political subdivisions and governmental structure.

1777 Suffolk County representatives participate in founding New York State.

1778 Act of State Legislature provides for annual meeting of Supervisors of a county to apportion county court expenses among the towns. This is the origin of the Board of Supervisors.

1829 to 1838 State laws are passed giving specific powers to a Board of Supervisors, leading to development of the Board into a local government with legislative and administrative functions.

1938 State Constitution permits counties outside New York City to draft and adopt their own charters subject to the approval of voters.

1954 Board of Supervisors appoints committee to study alternative forms of government for Suffolk County.

1958 Suffolk County Charter is drafted and ratified by County voters.

1959 Suffolk County elects its first County Executive, H. Lee Dennison.

1960 Suffolk County Charter goes into effect and first County Executive takes office.

1967 Board of Supervisors establishes the Suffolk County Charter Revision Commission.

1970 Suffolk County legislative body is changed from 10-person Board of Supervisors to County Legislature with 18 representatives—one elected from each of the County’s new Legislative Districts, with a County Executive elected at-large.

1979 Local Law enacted provides for voter initiative to change County Law through the ballot. To date, this provision of the Law has never been used.