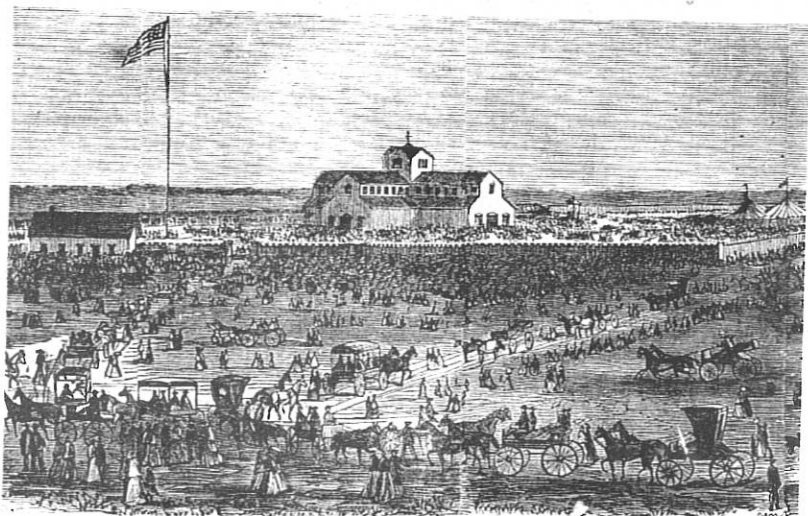


THE MINEOLA FAIR:
MIRROR OF A COUNTY'S GROWTH

BY
GARY R. HAMMOND



QUEENS COUNTY FAIR GROUNDS, NEAR MINEOLA, LONG ISLAND.

(The tradition continues as The Long Island Fair)

*Reprinted from The Nassau County Historical Society Journal
Volume LIV, 1999*

THE MINEOLA FAIR:
MIRROR OF A COUNTY'S GROWTH

By
GARY R. HAMMOND

© 1999 by Gary R. Hammond

The Mineola Fair: Mirror of a County's Growth

Gary R. Hammond

"This is the season of the pumpkin and the corn, the three layer chocolate cake and apple pie, the four foot cheese and the chain whittled out of one stick of wood, without separating the links, by an enterprising farmer boy, the crazy quilt sewed from 1,489 pieces by the oldest woman in the township, the real oil painting done by hand by the daughter of the grocer at the corners, the tatting tidy, the newest thing in reapers and the samples of guano—take one. In brief, the county fair has opened, and the honest granger . . . takes a day off to see the wonders of that annual outbreak. . . . If he is of a sportive disposition he has entered his horse, Interfering Silas, to run half a mile around the track against Peg-Legged Maria, his neighbor's mare, and in an excess of excitement sometimes bets 25 cents on him. . . .

"And where would the statesman be without the fair as a means of self exploitation? How many little votes are picked up at these functions by the lawyer who wants to be sheriff. . . . How many sheriffs who want to be governor, and how many governors who want to be President, find it to their advantage to visit these fairs and comment with enthusiasm on the grapes and the tomatoes and extend their personal congratulations to the woman who baked the prize donuts! . . . The country would be duller and less progressive if it were not for its fair. It enlivens it socially and industrially and should never be permitted to dwindle in size and interest."

Is this a quote from last fall's fair, or from one held 150 years ago? Very little seems to change at an annual county fair. Actually it's a quote from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of September 20, 1899—one hundred years ago, when Nassau County was still new!

The "Mineola Fair" is one of the oldest continuously operated fairs in New York State. The Agricultural Society has been in operation since 1841, and with rare exception has held a fair yearly since 1842. The history and activities of the county Agricultural Society mirrors the change and growth of the county itself.

More than three hundred years ago, on November 11, 1692, an act authorizing public markets and fairs was adopted by the New York legislation. During the following one hundred fifty years, periodic fairs were held on Long Island, both in Kings and Queens Counties. In May 1728, a lion was on display at the four day Jamaica Fair. Even on the eve of the Revolutionary War, in 1774, two Queens County Fairs were held in Jamaica, each lasting four days in duration. Due to the war with Great Britain, and the increased call for American-made goods, between 1811 and 1815, premiums were given out for the best woolen cloths made in the county. On November 11, 1817, a meeting was held to consider

creating an organization devoted to improving "the method of farming, the raising of stock, and rural economy." This meeting was held at the old Queens County Courthouse located on Jericho Turnpike in what is now Garden City Park. However, it would be another year and a half before an agricultural society would be created on June 21, 1819. Several prominent men were elected as officers including Rufus King (as president), Effingham Lawrence and Singleton Mitchell (as vice presidents). This organization sponsored four yearly fairs, held at the courthouse, prior to dissolving in 1822. Starting in 1828, the American Institute Fair, held in New York City, attracted numerous entries from Long Islanders. In 1832, the New York State Agricultural Society was founded "to improve the condition of agriculture, horticulture, and household arts." Many Long Islanders became members of the State Society during the following decades, and some, like John Harold of Hempstead, would serve in an official capacity and receive much praise for his efforts.¹

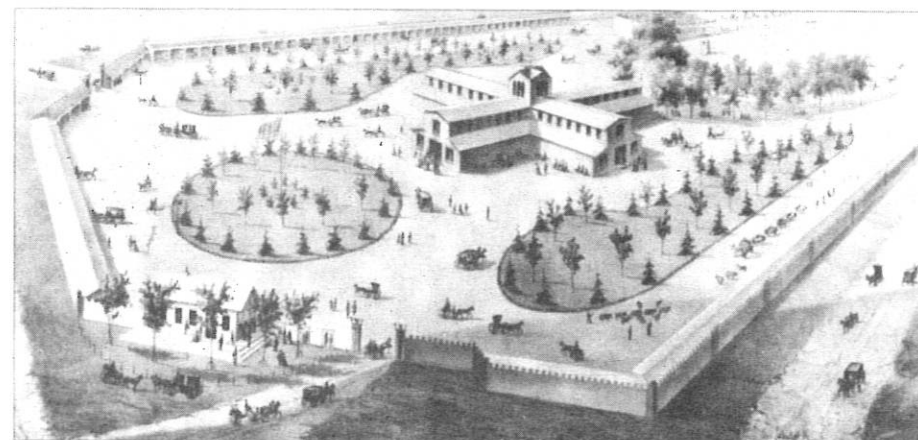
Finally, in 1841, a revival of interest in establishing an agricultural society resulted in the creation of the Queens County Agricultural Society (Q.C.A.S.). On October 9, 1841, Effingham Lawrence of Bayside was elected president, with Singleton Mitchell of Plandome elected one of six vice presidents. Each of these men had served twenty years earlier as vice presidents of the earlier, unsuccessful agricultural society. In addition, Albert G. Carll of Jericho, considered to be the chief originator of the Society, was elected corresponding secretary, John G. Lamberson of Hempstead was elected recording secretary, and Daniel K. Youngs of Oyster Bay was elected the Society's first treasurer.

A year later, on Tuesday, October 13, 1842, the first Q.C.A.S. Fair and Cattle Show was held at Robert G. Anderson's Hotel, located on the southwest corner of Main Street and Fulton Avenue in Hempstead. During the next twenty-three years, the annual Q.C.A.S. fair was held either at Hempstead, Flushing, Jamaica, or Newtown. These tent fairs were held in September or October, usually just for a single day. Horse racing (a Long Island tradition since the 1660s), plowing and spading contests, and exhibitions of "modern" mowing machines and grain reapers were regular features. Helping to increase attendance at the October 9, 1846 Fair, held at Flushing, was the fact that the American Institute held a plowing and spading match at the same time. At the 1853 fair, held in Hempstead, the tent had a gothic front, and was 40 feet wide and 130 feet long, covered with sails from the U.S.S. *Independence* and the U.S.S. *Constitution*, which were both docked in New York at the time.

At the annual meeting of November 30, 1857, the Queens County Agricultural Society was incorporated under the provisions of the New York State Laws, Chapter 425 of April 13, 1855. A major event sponsored by the Society occurred on July 1, 1858, when a competition of mowing machines was held on the farm of Valentine Willis, near Mineola. Two acts passed by the New York State Legislature in 1859 and in 1862, gave agricultural and horticultural associ-

ations the right to appoint policemen to protect their grounds and the property of exhibitors and furthermore to regulate any activity within two hundred yards of the fair grounds. Among the items regulated were all kinds of theatrical and circus exhibitions or shows, as well as huckstering or traffic in fruits, goods, wares, and merchandise for gain, if the same obstructed the highway around and approaching the fair grounds. The Q.C.A.S. took advantage of these laws to regularly hire off duty New York City police, detectives, and deputy sheriffs to serve as Q.C.A.S. policemen, paying them as much as \$2.00 per day by the 1880s.

The insecurity of tents and the persistent threat of bad weather, along with the population growth in the county, resulted in the need for a permanent fairgrounds. On April 3, 1866, at the Town of Hempstead town meeting, it was agreed to give forty acres of land on the Hempstead Plains near Mineola to the Q.C.A.S. This "permanent" fairgrounds would occupy an area south of Old Country Road, east of Franklin Avenue, and west of Washington Street (now the site of the Nassau County Court Complex). Plans called for erecting a business office, carriage sheds (for members to park their carriages and horses during the fair), and fencing in the entire forty acres. Focal point of the fairgrounds would be the Exhibition Hall, built in the shape of a Greek cross, 120 feet long in each direction and standing nearly 65 feet to the top of the eagle weathervane. The four wings held the needlework department, fruit department, grain and vegetable department, and manufactures department. The first post was set, starting construction, on July 26, 1866, and barely two months later the Society's twenty-fifth annual fair was the first to be held on the new "permanent" fairgrounds. For nearly eighty-five years the fairgrounds would serve as the home of the Agricultural Society and provide space to many other community organizations.²



Original design of the "Permanent Fair Grounds of the Queens County Agricultural Society, Mineola." Lithograph by Currier and Ives, 1867. Photograph courtesy of the Nassau County Museum Collection, Long Island Studies Institute at Hofstra University.

The Q.C.A.S. and its fair served as the showplace for the new technology and scientific agriculture being developed during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1851, horse-drawn mowing machines and grain reapers were introduced in Queens County. At the fair held in 1852 a premium was offered for the best example of this new technology. Premiums could be in the form of cash, a diploma, practical books dealing with scientific agriculture, or occasionally silver trophies or butter knives, or, as in 1848, "for a pair of Mules," a silver fork. In 1867, with the Victorian era's increasing interest in flower gardens and landscape design, the first Horticultural Show was added as a June feature. The Ladies' Festival Association sold strawberries, ice cream, and lemonade realizing a profit of \$846.75. They would continue to hold Festivals through 1894, having contributed \$10,909.25 total to the support of the Society. It was through the efforts of the Ladies of the Society, in particular Sarah Ann Barnum (wife of Peter C. Barnum, the New York City clothier), that both a one hundred foot flagpole and flag were acquired in 1867 for the fairgrounds.

In 1869, at the twenty-eighth Annual Fair, Richard Dudgeon of Locust Valley demonstrated his steam carriage—a predecessor to today's automobile. Nicknamed the "Red Devil" it had room for twelve passengers on two wood benches which were built atop the flat water tanks on each side of the boiler. It required an "engineer" to pilot it and had to stop every three miles to add water in the boiler and coal to the fire. The last time it was seen to operate, in 1903, it supposedly traveled at ten miles per hour. As late as 1938 the "Red Devil" was still in existence, the subject of a custody battle in Nassau County Court.³

The year 1869 also saw a Grand Trial of Velocipedes, "with a view of judging of the qualities of the machines, and their merits as a means of healthy exercise." It would be many years before the safety bicycle would be developed, but seeing its wooden wheeled velocipede ancestor in competition was quite a thrill. Among some of the premiums offered were: for the safest machine; for the best machine for the use of ladies; for the most expert and skillful riding; for the most graceful riding; for the slowest riding; for the best riding by a boy under twelve years of age; for the fastest riding by experts (or amateurs); and for the best made two, three, or four wheel machine.

The Directors of the Q.C.A.S. were quite up-to-date when in 1872 they authorized Mary Titus of Mineola, as Keeper of the Grounds to open the gates every afternoon—if necessary. The 1874 Fair saw the addition of a bench show of dogs—the first of its kind in the United States. This show of hunting dogs attracted several different types of setters and pointers from as far away as Coram in Suffolk County and Jersey City, New Jersey.

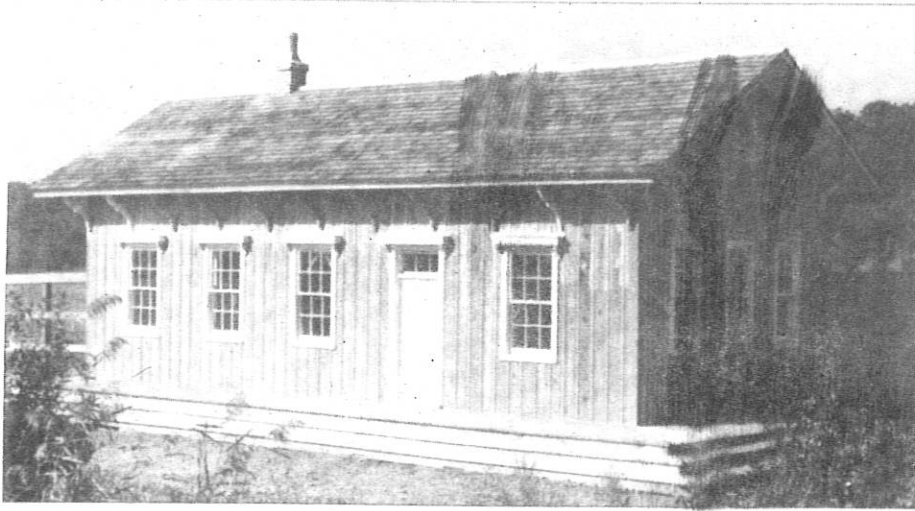
During the 1860s and 1870s, baseball was becoming "the national pastime." In 1875 the first game of baseball to be played on the fairgrounds was held. The 1876 Spring Exhibition included a "base ball" tournament, open to Queens County base ball clubs, and being played for the Q.C.A.S.'s silver ball.

Participating in this tournament was the Senacas of Newtown, the Live Oaks of Roslyn, the Lexingtons of Jamaica, and the Resolutes of Long Island City, the latter winning the silver ball by a score of 8 to 7. However, by 1879 baseball was discontinued as it "has heretofore interfered with the exhibition of horses, but that species of doubtful entertainment may [now] properly cease."

Also present at the Tenth Annual Spring Exhibition in 1876 was a Long Island Centennial Exhibition and the presence of both Montauk and Shinnecock Indians. Just seven months after Thomas Alva Edison patented the phonograph, on February 19, 1878, he was demonstrating it at the 1878 Q.C.A.S. Fair. To encourage children, the 1878 Fair included the first school exhibit. However, it wouldn't be until 1897 that school children would be admitted free. By the 1880s the privilege of setting up a carousel was given, but with one stipulation—no music! Elsewhere on the fairgrounds could be found T. H. Bedell's Dining Tent, or vendors selling peanuts, candy, roasted sausages, popcorn, sugars, oysters, pies, cakes, sandwiches, even pocket books. If you went under the grandstand you could find Charles Thielman selling refreshments including lager beer, cider, ale, and sarsaparilla, and not far away Wm. F. Oliver, of the Eagle Mills, Hempstead, selling feed and grain. Over by the Exhibition Hall you might find B. F. Hillery of Astoria selling five pounds of Taylor's Compound for horse and cattle food for \$1.00, right next door to a photographer wanting to take your tintype. If you ventured inside the buildings you might see everything from oil paintings by Charles H. Miller, to displays of cooking stoves, farm harnesses, fancy needlework, cider vinegar, and even an example of "superior manufactured Brick." An example of the amount of interest the fair created could be seen in 1887 when 783 entries were exhibited and \$6,538 worth of premiums were given out. The progressiveness of the Society was again seen when on May 14, 1887 the Board voted to have a non-smoking section of the grandstand—nearly one hundred years ahead of their time!

In 1899, the year Nassau County was created from Queens County, New York State Governor Theodore Roosevelt delivered an address at the fair and ate lunch there. Starting in 1898, the matter of changing the Society's name to include the new County of Nassau was discussed. It wouldn't be until April 15, 1899 that a resolution was passed changing the name to the Agricultural Society of Queens-Nassau Counties. Though the directors of the Agricultural Society tried to prevent the introduction of automobiles on the fairgrounds, by 1908 the inevitable had happened. Not only were they allowed on the fairgrounds, but the first real show of autos with a tent reserved for that purpose appeared. By 1916 no carriages were exhibited, only autos. Eventually more than forty buildings would occupy the fairgrounds. In 1918 no fair was held, as the grounds were used as a United States Army base hospital to help treat the thousands of cases of influenza. The total number cared for was 12,693, of whom 399 died.

By 1925, so small were the numbers of sheep and swine available, that the exhibit was omitted. Between July 3-6, 1926, the Ku Klux Klan rented the



The business or secretary's office on the fairgrounds at Old Bethpage Village Restoration. This reconstruction was financed by the Nassau County Historical Society. Photograph courtesy of the Nassau County Museum Collection, Long Island studies Institute at Hofstra University.

fairgrounds for their Klorero. During this time period auto racing, baby shows, and the Boy Scouts also appeared on the fairgrounds. Another sign of the changing times occurred in 1934 when the old cattle building, which had only been built in 1928 for \$37,899.50, became the Mineola Skating Rink and would serve that purpose through the 1950s. Part of the Long Island Tercentenary celebration was held at the fairgrounds in 1936. Beginning in 1938, the property was slowly transformed into the Nassau County Court Complex. As a result, 1952 would be the last fair held in Mineola. In 1953 the fair moved to Roosevelt Raceway and became the Mineola Fair and Industrial Exposition. In the 1950s, the fairs were held approximately every other year. It was during this time period that once again a name change seemed appropriate, this time to the Agricultural Society of Queens, Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

In 1961, the "Mineola Fair" officially became the Long Island Fair. Due to interference with the racing schedule at Roosevelt Raceway a new home was needed by the end of the 1960s. On September 18-20, 1970, the Long Island Fair moved to its present home, the Nassau County-operated Old Bethpage Village Restoration. From 1970 through 1984 the fair came full circle and went back to its traditional agricultural roots as a tent fair. Since 1985 the fair has been held in a recreation of the original 1866 Q.C.A.S. fairgrounds. Just as in 1866, this fairgrounds is being created not only with government cooperation, but through the donations of the public, including groups such as the Nassau County Historical Society and the Friends for Long Island's Heritage.

Throughout its existence the Agricultural Society has been fortunate to have had prominent men serve as its officers, such as New York State Governor John A. King of Jamaica, Lt. Governor David R. Floyd-Jones of Massapequa, and Chancellor William T. McCoun of Glen Cove. Other officials of the fair also served as secretary of state, state senator, judges, bankers, local government officials, and firemen.

There are three people whose involvement with the Society deserves to be highlighted. The first is Bloodgood H. Cutter of Little Neck, a life member of the Society. Known as "The Long Island Farmer Poet," also as Mark Twain's "Poet Larriat" in *Innocents Abroad*, he regularly attended the Fair. To quote the *Brooklyn Times*, "At the fair the old poet was the liveliest of the thousands of visitors. He would flit about from place to place, and it required only a request from one of the ladies to set his muse soaring and he could grind out a poem on anything from a hoe handle to one of the quilts in the art hall." At least four of his published poems are about the Fair.⁴

John Harold of Hempstead was the secretary/treasurer of the Q.C.A.S. for twenty-three years. Harold not only supervised the construction of the fairgrounds, but designed the exhibition hall. He was so active in community organizations, such as the Hempstead Board of Education, and Greenfield Cemetery, that his gravestone is inscribed "HE RESTS, BUT HIS WORKS ARE MONUMENTS TO A LIFE OF PUBLIC ACTIVITY." Bloodgood Cutter said "Mr. Harrold's duties were very hard, / For him, we should have great regard; / Of our Society he seems the life or soul, / Of the labors does, or directs the whole. / He seems so busy on fair day, / To friends, can hardly a word say; / 'Tis Harrold here, and Harrold there, / On Harrold falls the greater share."⁵



Entrance to the Mineola Fair Grounds, c. 1905. Photograph of post card courtesy of the Nassau County Museum, Long Island Studies Institute at Hofstra University.

Lastly is Lott Van De Water, Jr., also of Hempstead. Even though as early as 1879 the Society was concerned with collecting and binding for preservation its early records, if it wasn't for Lott Van De Water, secretary from 1897 to 1926, we probably wouldn't have the archives and Society history in existence today. He compiled bound volumes of annual reports and premium lists, autographs of prominent members, typed historical reports, and kept wonderful minutes. These records now comprise the Society's archives which are part of the Nassau County Division of Museum Services Collection at the Long Island Studies Institute at Hofstra University.⁶

For 157 years the Agricultural Society and its fair has grown, changed, and reflected its times. In the year 2000, this agricultural fair rooted in the nineteenth century will progress into the twenty-first century.⁷

Notes

1. Ulysses Prentiss Hedrick, *A History of Agriculture in the State of New York* (New York: State Agricultural Society, 1933), p. 120; "Death of Mr. John Harold," *Queens County Sentinel*, November 2, 1876.

2. See Mrs. Irwin (Mildred) Smith, "Building the Fair Grounds," *Nassau County Historical Society Journal* 27, no. 2 (1966): 1-8, reprinted in 37 (1982): 29-36. (Editor's note.)

3. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and *Herald Tribune*, June 22, 1938.

4. *Brooklyn Times*, undated clipping [May 1901 or 1902]. On Cutter, see Richard A. Winsche, "Bloodgood Haviland Cutter, The Long Island Farmer Poet," *Nassau County Historical Society Journal* 45 (1990): 13-27. (Editor's note.)

5. Bloodgood H. Cutter, "The Fair at Flushing," dated October 4, 1861, in *The Long Island Farmer's Poems* (New York: N. Tibbals and Sons, 1886), pp. 157-60. (Cutter misspelled Harold's name.)

6. Fortunately, in 1963 the Officers of the Agricultural Society had the foresight to donate the records of the Society to the Nassau County Division of Museum Services for preservation (NCM no. L63.6). Previously, a collection of photographs and portraits of the officers of the Society that had been given to the Nassau County Historical Society (c. 1943), had also been deposited with the Museum. This collection forms the core of a comprehensive archives documenting not only the history of the Agricultural Society, but the agricultural, technological, and recreational way of life available to past generations of Long Islanders. Although gaps in the collection exist, the records span from 1841 to the 1960s, and range from the manuscript minutes of the Board of Directors, treasurer's records, inventories, scrapbooks, published Annual Reports, and Premium Lists to addresses delivered before the Society, deeds, and insurance policies. This collection has since been supplemented by generous donations from past officials, and the general public and is now in the Long Island Studies Institute at Hofstra University. All information not specifically cited in this article is from this collection.

7. See also James W. Carpenter, *The Mineola Fair* (Uniondale: Westbury's Agricultural Society of Queens, Nassau and Suffolk Counties, 1965). (Editor's note.)

About the Author

Gary R. Hammond has been with the Nassau County Division of Museum Services since 1973. He is Supervisor of Special Events and Historic Crafts at Old Bethpage Village Restoration and an historian with the Long Island Studies Institute. He is a co-founder and the Historian for Company H, 119th New York Volunteers Historical Association, a living history Civil War group. He is a well known speaker and consultant, not only on Long Island History, but on 19th century technology and decorative arts. This article was originally presented at the Nassau County Centennial Conference at Hofstra University in March 1999.