

The Great Depression and New Deal on Long Island, New York

by Lorraine Lupinskie-Huvane and Alan Singer

This article is adapted from the introduction to *The Great Depression and the New Deal on Long Island: A Local History Curriculum Guide*. The curriculum was prepared by members of the Hofstra (University) Social Studies Educators as part of a series of local history curriculum guides available on their website at <http://www.geocities.com/hsse.geo>. The guides use local sources, especially community newspapers, to help students explore the relationship between national and international events and life in their communities.

Our finding, that despite actively participating in and benefiting from New Deal programs, Long Island, New York was a bastion of the anti-Roosevelt opposition during the 1932 and 1936 presidential elections, is significant for several reasons. It underscores the importance of studying local history in order to understand complex ideological, social, economic and geographic conflicts in American society, conflicts that can be masked when the focus is on national, regional or statewide concerns. The discovery of deep-seated and enduring local conservative political enclaves and media help to explain the continuing opposition to Roosevelt's policies during the 1930s and the reemergence of Republican forces on the national scene after World War II. On Long Island, one of the county-based Republican Party organizations became a leading power-broker, influencing the selection and election of statewide candidates throughout the twentieth century.

The study of local developments, such as those on Long Island during the 1930s, illustrate the intricacies of political behavior in a democratic society. Voters and their representatives, as well as municipal and county governments, could participate in specific programs that benefited them, while opposing broader political reorganization they perceived of as against their interests. This history adds substance to James Madison's claims about the ability of the federal system under the Constitution to resist the power of temporary majority factions to fundamentally alter the national balance of power.

We believe it would be interesting to compare the survival of conservative political forces on Long Island during the New Deal with the emergence of Republican majorities in the Southern and Western states during the post-war era. However, similar studies could be done comparing local voting patterns with national trends in any community during any era. The involvement of

secondary school students in this type of project utilizing local archives and newspapers would provide students with authentic experience working as historians and possibly allow them to make a significant contribution to research.

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According to the 1940 New York State Works Progress Administration (WPA) Guide, "Long Island, thrusting 125 miles eastward from New York Bay to a point abreast of New London, Connecticut, faces the New England coast across Long Island Sound on the north and fronts the open Atlantic on the south. The long, narrow outline of the island resembles that of a whale. . . . The island comprises four counties: Kings (Brooklyn), Queens, Nassau, and Suffolk. The first two are constituent parts of New York City, so that when a New Yorker speaks of Long Island he refers to Nassau and Suffolk. These two counties present a marked contrast. Nassau, with a population of more than 300,000 and an area of 252 square miles, is a congestion of bustling villages containing the homes of the hordes of executives, clerks, and artisans who are disgorged every evening from the metropolis. . . . Suffolk, with half the population of Long Island and an area four times as large as Nassau, depends primarily on agriculture and fishing. Its farmers, fisherman, clammers, and local shop people live in scattered villages, many with white wood churches casting peaceful shadows on village greens reminiscent of the New England coast and countryside." (1)

In 1932, President Herbert Hoover was challenged for the presidency by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Democratic Governor of New York State. Even though Roosevelt was from New York, on Long Island, he was strongly opposed by the Nassau County Republican Party, many of the local newspapers, and a majority of Nassau County voters. *The Farmingdale Post*, *The Hempstead Sentinel* and *The Garden City News* all supported Herbert Hoover and local Republican candidates in the election. (2) While nationally, Roosevelt received 22,800,000 popular votes and 472 electoral votes compared to Hoover's 15,750,000 popular votes and 59

electoral votes, the final tally showed that Nassau County remained one of the strongest bastions of the Republican Party giving Herbert Hoover a 18,849 vote majority. (3)

Part of the reason for this opposition to Roosevelt was the relative affluence of Long Island, especially north shore towns in Nassau County. Residents of the town of Great Neck included business leaders Walter P. Chrysler and Joseph Grace, and the well known entertainer, Eddie Cantor. In a 1932 article in the local newspaper, they each praised the areas beauty, suburban isolation, and convenience to New York City. None of them mentioned any local problems related to the Great Depression. (4)

During the first one hundred days of his administration, President Roosevelt moved quickly to have the federal government address the urgent problems facing the country. Many of his proposals, as well as his commitment to activist government, were based on his experience in New York and on Long Island.

As Governor of New York, Roosevelt had witnessed first-hand the inability of states and localities to meet the needs of their battered citizens. For example, on Long Island, in 1930, the city of Long Beach had to drastically cut back on public employment because "there was no work for them to do, nor was there money enough in the city treasury to pay them." (5) In Hempstead, the Welfare Department reported an enormous increase in appeals for assistance from poor and needy families and that many families faced the loss of their homes because they were "unable to meet interest charges and pay their taxes because they have been out of employment for considerable periods." (6) In Glen Cove and Islip, municipal leaders called on the state government to provide money for relief and Nassau Supervisor G. Wilber Doughty charged that the county government was ready to start work programs, but was being held up by the State Highway Department. (7)

In response to these problems, Governor Roosevelt became an activist. He responded to requests for government assistance with road construction funds, including money to complete the Northern State Parkway and a work relief program. (8) In July, 1931, he ended a tour of Long Island communities with an inspection of road construction sites at Jones Beach, Valley Stream and Little Neck. "Wielding a trowel as he applied the mortar at the cornerstone of the highway construction project, the Governor hailed the event as a significant advance...He went on to assert that plans must be made to link the Grand Central-Northern Parkway with the

projected Tri-Borough Bridge and to devise a connection running well into Brooklyn from the Southern State Parkway." (9)

State relief plans, however, were clearly insufficient. Rev. Francis J. Healey, a rector of St. Joseph's Church at Garden City demanded that the federal government "set up the machinery to supply the worker with work." According to Rev. Healey, the depression was the result of the economic system and millions of people who wanted to work could not find jobs. (10) A front-page article in *The Hempstead Sentinel* reported on a meeting of the Hempstead Lions Club where State Supreme Court Justice Thomas J. Cuffs called on the United States government to take on huge public improvement projects as a cure for the depression." (11)

At least one local Long Island newspaper, *The Nassau Daily Review*, later claimed that as a result of Roosevelt's experience as Governor of New York State, "practically every provision of the Nassau county public works relief program, adopted by the board of supervisors in November, 1931, is incorporated in the Roosevelt (New Deal) job increase plan." The director of the national public works effort was Harry Hopkins, former director of relief efforts in New York State. When Hopkins worked in New York, he had distributed copies of the Nassau County relief plan to programs around the state. (12)

Once Franklin Roosevelt was elected President, Long Island residents, businesses, and communities took full advantage of New Deal initiatives. Herbert Lehman, who succeeded Roosevelt as Governor of New York, immediately proposed a public works plan that included construction of a new Meadowbrook Causeway to Jones Beach with a spur connecting with Long Beach. (13) In 1933, headlines in *The Garden City News* announced "Garden City's Part In the N.R.A. Program", "Federal Millions For Long Island Work Projects", and "Work on P.O. Soon To Start." According to the last article, five new post offices buildings would be built in Suffolk County and four new buildings in Nassau County. In October, 1934, in *The Garden City News*, a headline read, "Over Nine Millions Spent For Relief In Nassau." (14) On January 18, 1934, a front-page headline in *The Hempstead Sentinel* announced, "Discuss Plan Here For \$500,000 Issue for More Land and New Schools." In August, the Hempstead-based Better Housing Program Committee announced its intention to utilize provisions of the National Housing Act to improve the community. Significantly, given their Republican Party loyalties, in an article in the August 30, 1934 issue of *The Hempstead Sentinel*, Long Islanders praised the federal government for taking the initiative and called on local governments and communities to

do their part. (15) Also in August, 1934, the Hempstead School Board expressed amazement at how fast the Public Works Division of the Federal Government had made available money for school construction. (16)

Long Islanders mobilized to end the Great Depression and support the New Deal in a number of ways. In July, 1933, Glen Cove organized a committee of business leaders and civic groups to press for the reemployment of the local unemployed. (17) In September, 1933, a county-wide mass meeting attended by 50,000 people was held at the Mineola Fair Grounds to support the National Recovery program and organize parades in different Long Island communities. Also in September, 1933, money raised at two performances of the Playground Players at the Hempstead High School Auditorium was used to support Mayor Chamberlin's Unemployment Relief Committee. (18)

Despite this significant support for New Deal programs, many Long Island residents did not welcome the New Deal. A year after FDR's election victory, Glen Cove voters overwhelmingly elected the Republican candidates for municipal government, throwing out the entire previous Democratic regime. (19) Robert Moses received strong local support as the Republican candidate for Governor of New York in 1934. (20) In May, 1935, *The Nassau Daily Review* reported charges by the Nassau County Bankers' and Clearing House Association that the New Deal was the cause of the nation's economic and social problems. (21) On October 17, 1935, a front-page article in *The Hempstead Sentinel* reported on a speech by Professor Walter Spahr at Hempstead High School. Spahr "denounced the (Roosevelt) administration for having adopted most of the socialists' program; for its orgy of borrowing and spending, and spoke at length on the need of sound currency, the maintenance of the Constitution and the Supreme Court." (22) A Manhasset woman even launched an anti-New Deal crusade, selling automobile plates that said: "Is This Democracy: Fabulous Promises, Destructive Taxes, Reckless Spending." (23) Throughout the era, local Congressman Robert Bacon, a vice-chairman of the Republican National Committee remained a vocal opponent of New Deal legislation. In 1936, he accused Roosevelt and his supporters of launching a nationwide campaign "which for sheer stupidity and silliness outdoes many other things attempted by it." According to Congressman Bacon, "those who work for a living will very properly resent this despicable attempt at intimidation." (24)

In the spring of 1935, the Roosevelt Administration launched what has come to be known as the "Second New Deal." Once again, Long Island's municipalities and county governments were

deeply involved with these programs. In November, 1935, Great Neck and Manhasset used money from the WPA to build and improve school buildings. Hempstead Village rebuilt its sewer system as part of a work relief program. Nassau County spent over a million dollars in federal money on sidewalk construction. Great Neck used WPA funds to provide adult education classes. (25) In addition, many New York City construction projects, especially LaGuardia Airport, the Queens Midtown Tunnel, and the Triborough Bridge, benefited Long Island residents.

Around Long Island, people were put to work and roads, sewers, beaches, parks, and buildings were constructed and historical sites were preserved. While there were no permanent Civilian Conservation Corps work camps on Long Island, corps members did participate in projects at Bethpage State Park in Nassau County and Hither Hills State Park in Suffolk County. By September, 1936, the WPA had spent over one million dollars on projects in Suffolk County ranging from supporting a State Game Farm, to repairing an incinerator gutted by fire in Huntington, to painting Central Islip and Kings Park State Hospitals.

A number of WPA murals are still on display on Long Island. They include art work at the Hempstead Fire House (Southside Hose Company No. 2), Hicksville and Sewanaka Central High Schools, Hicksville Junior High School, the Bay Shore, Westhampton, and Yaphank Post Offices in Suffolk County, and the Floral Park, Freeport, Garden City, Great Neck, Hempstead, Long Beach, Mineola, Oyster Bay, Port Washington, and Rockville Centre Post Offices in Nassau County. The Hempstead Fire House has six murals that illustrate the history of fire fighting; the Sewanaka Central High School student cafeteria has two murals by WPA artist Frederick Marshall that depict native American life on Long Island; and the Hempstead, Mineola, Oyster Bay, and Port Washington Post Office murals focus on local history. (26)

WPA programs on Long Island were not without scandal. On December 9, 1935, The Nassau Daily Review demanded the removal of Harold Howe as WPA Director for Nassau and Suffolk Counties because he had assigned "unprepared office workers to manual labor in the wintry cold at Jones Beach." The paper charged that this "climaxes the evidence of alleged mismanagement of WPA affairs in Nassau County." (27) In addition, a grand jury was meeting to investigate the conduct of the county's relief administration. *The Long Island Sun* reported on an investigation into connections between the WPA and illegal gambling at carnivals operated to raise money for

local charities. Eight people were arrested at a rigged wheel of fortune in Copiague that was operated by WPA workers. (28)

The willingness of local governments to take advantage of New Deal programs did not mean a change in the electoral or ideological loyalties of Nassau County voters or newspapers. During the 1936 presidential campaign, the local press continually highlighted alleged corruption in federally sponsored projects and much of the local press again endorsed Roosevelt's Republican opponent. In the election, while the nation overwhelmingly voted to reelect Roosevelt, Nassau voters gave his Republican opponent a substantial edge. (29)

Despite continued government efforts during the New Deal, the depression dragged on until increased spending on war materials stimulated economic recovery. On Long Island, the threat of World War II meant new contracts and larger plants at Grumman Aircraft, Republic Aviation, and other smaller corporations. Military spending provided new local jobs and salaries that Long Island consumers could spend on housing, clothing, food, and other needed goods. (30) Ultimately, government spending in the years leading up to World War II fulfilled the promise of the New Deal and ended the Great Depression on Long Island and in the United States.

Endnotes

- (1) Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration. *New York: A Guide to the Empire State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 691.
- (2) *The Farmlandale Post*, November 4, 1932; *The Hempstead Sentinel*, November 3, 1932; *The Garden City News*, October 19, 1932.
- (3) *The Farmlandale Post*, March 3, 1932; October 14, 1932; November 11, 1932
- (4) *The Great Neck Record*, April 15, 1932.
- (5) *The New York Times*, January 9, 1930; January 10, 1930.
- (6) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, March 13, 1930; July 31, 1930; November 20, 1930; December 17, 1931.
- (7) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, May 8, 1930.
- (8) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, March 17, 1932.
- (9) *The New York Times*, July 27, 1931.
- (10) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, October 30, 1930.
- (11) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, March 17, 1932.
- (12) *The Nassau Daily Review*, November 9, 1933.

- (13) *The New York Times*, February 22, 1933.
- (14) *The Garden City News*, November 23, 1933; November 16, 1933.
- (15) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, August 30, 1934.
- (16) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, August 23, 1934.
- (17) *Glen Cove Echo*, July 27, 1933.
- (18) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, September 21, 1933; September 7, 1933.
- (19) *Glen Cove Echo*, November 9, 1933.
- (20) *The Garden City News*, October 11, 1934.
- (21) *The Nassau Daily Review*, May 17, 1935.
- (22) *The Hempstead Sentinel*, October 1, 1935.
- (23) *The Great Neck Record*, November 26, 1935.
- (24) *The Long Island Sun*, September 18, 1936.
- (25) *The Great Neck Record*, November 26, 1935; December 6, 1935.
- (26) Shapiro, David, ed., *Art for the People - New Deal Murals on Long Island* (Hofstra University, Emily Lowe Gallery, November 1- December 31, 1978).
- (27) *The Nassau Daily Review*, December 9, 1935.
- (28) *The Long Island Sun*, August 28, 1936.
- (29) *The Long Island Sun*, August 28, 1936; September 4, 1936; September 11, 1936; September 18, 1936; *The Garden City News*, October 8, 1936; *The Farmingdale Post*, October 22, 1936; October 29, 1936; *The Hempstead Sentinel*, October 29, 1936; November 5, 1936.
- (30) *The Farmingdale Post*, November 9, 1939; February 8, 1940; September 12, 1940.