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BOOK REVIEW; Why Nassau County Is No New York City

By BARTH HEALEY

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SITTING in southbound traffic on Glen Cove Road, waiting for a vast tractor-trailer to make a tight right turn through the tangled traffic onto Old Country Road, one forgets there was life in Nassau County before the internal combustion engine.

Last week Hofstra University offered this aid to memory: an edited collection of papers delivered a year earlier at a conference presented by Hofstra and the Long Island Studies Institute to mark the centennial of the establishment of the county, on Jan. 1, 1899.

Some histories herein, mostly dry but well written, stretch back to the earliest settlements in the 1640's. But the focus is on the years leading to Nassau's "independence" and beyond, and the emphasis is frequently on the fact that -- thank heavens -- Nassau is not New York City.

In 1898 the western two-thirds of what was then Queens County -- Long Island City, Newtown, Jamaica and Flushing -- was joined to New York City; the eastern third -- Hempstead, North Hempstead and Oyster Bay -- was left in a sort of limbo. That limbo lasted a year, until Nassau County was created. (Among the many bits of trivia: the name Nassau originated in the 12th century.)

Two themes that drive so many conversations on the Island today run through this centennial history: politics and the environment.

Strong-willed male Republicans dominated the county's development, including Senator Thomas C. Platt, who muscled approval of the new county through the State Legislature in 1898, and J. Russel Sprague, who centralized executive power in 1936, making Nassau the first county in the nation to have an elected chief executive.

One of the more enlightening essays is by Marjorie Freeman Harrison, a library media specialist at Lawrence High School, who tells how G. Wilbur Doughty built on the cohesiveness of the Italian immigrant community in Inwood to solidify Republican power.

Two environmental issues seemed to dominate the South Shore: the decision to sell water from Hempstead to Brooklyn (and thus deplete Island supplies) beginning in 1871 and the dredging and sewage disposal that had to be addressed in the development of Long Beach in 1907. Both are laid out clearly here.

The compendium touches on other conversation points.

Is Nassau County "united"? The various roles of the Hempstead Plains -- farmland and military training ground and now the route of major east-west road and rail divides -- are described in several essays, but still the consensus is that the north-south social and economic gap has been bridged.

How much power should developers have?

This issue is examined at some length by Patricia T. Caro in her chronology of the drawing of the Queens-Nassau border, especially in the Five Towns area (an article that could have used more detailed maps).

There are a few misfires. Articles on the Jewish communities and on women in the clergy seem to lack the "Island-ness" of the others. The six short summaries on health care are perfunctory. And an article on Alan King and Billy Crystal titled "From Soup to Nuts: Laughter in the Suburbs" does not seem to have any point.

The index -- a key component of any reference work -- is uneven (William Burden, the originator of the plan to sell water to Queens, is omitted; a passing reference to Frank Sinatra is included).

Overall, though, this book is a rich, well-written source of information. Several towns are covered in some depth: Hempstead, Inwood, the Bellmores, Farmingdale (two articles), Long Beach. Almost all the 32 papers include extensive bibliographies.

A browse through this collection could prove a welcome distraction after a morning spent inching along Old Country Road.

NASSAU COUNTY

From Rural Hinterland to Suburban Metropolis

Joann P. Krieg and Natalie A. Naylor, editors

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