

THE HEMPSTEAD PLAINS

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The townspeople wanted a post office in Manetto Hill in 1885. Washington said no, officials having visions of letters bound for Manitou in upstate New York going astray on Long Island. So the residents, taking their cue from the Hempstead Plains spread in front of them, opted for Plainview. They got their post office.

But today they can not enjoy the fields of three-to five-foot high beardgrasses, the broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*) changing to copper or red-orange in autumn and the prairie beardgrass (*Andropogon scoparius*) taking on a silvery hue along with a rich mixture of tan, brown and wine-red which remains through the winter. "A Ruysdael landscape; three-quarters sky and one-quarter earth," says Alonzo Gibbs in his novel of a seventeenth-century girl living by these plains, "The Fields Breathe Sweet."

The names remain: Plainedge where people could also look out on what was 60,000 acres of Long Island prairie; East Meadow and Island Trees, the latter named for one of the occasional small stands of trees, usually of wild black cherry (*Prunus serotina*) or if on the banks of one of the streams like the Meadow Brook then probably a dominance of weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*). But for all the plains that are left today one can see them out an east window of the Marriott Hotel on Mitchel Field—forty acres.

Guests will not write home about this scenic overlook crawling with prickly dewberry (*Rubus hispids*) and upright black cherry (*Rubus allegheniensis*). These with the first of what would be many gray birch (*Betula populifolia*) and wild black cherry are replacing the grasses and flowers. Also, there are camping platforms installed by Nassau County which owns the property. Contrary to the platforms, which are termed temporary, the County has designated these acres for use as a Hempstead Plains park. The camping facilities can be removed and the area burned over for the grasslands vegetation to reassert itself. This back lot-of-a-looking parcel is the final opportunity to show people through a living example that Long Island had a prairie.

It would show school children the other half of the story exhibited across Mitchel Field in the two old hangars and firehouse housing the Cradle of Aviation Museum. This was opened in 1980 following the efforts of many aviators and organizations—George C. Dade of Glen Head, for example, acting in his capacity as Chairman of the Air and Space Committee of the Friends for Long Island's Heritage. He used to help Charles Lindbergh on with his parachute and at seventeen was the nation's youngest pilot in 1929.

Aviation, says Dade, "may have been conceived by the Brothers Wright in Columbus (Ohio) and born on the sands of Kitty Hawk (North Carolina). But it was nurtured and raised on the Hempstead Plains."

It was the virtually open and level landscape that (along with the proximity of New York and the opportunities of capturing headlines along with financial entrepreneurs) that attracted the early record makers and barnstormers. The land slopes only fifteen feet a mile from the Ronkonkoma Moraine from which the first soils of the plains were spread with the melting waters of the glacier.

The first Long Island flights were made by Glenn H. Curtiss, a friendly, but reserved man with something of the look of a serious Burt Reynolds with a big, black mustache. Curtiss remembered the flat terrain around Garden City when he came there for automobile races in 1905. He returned looking for a field from which to try for a second leg toward permanent possession of the huge silver *Scientific American* Trophy for increasingly tough aviation feats. This time it was for flying a circle of 15.5 miles. He found the spot, a broad field north of the Mineola Fairgrounds.

On July 12, 1909, he started practice trials with his "Golden Flier," a wind gust tilting it once so that a wing tip brushed the tall grass, causing spectators to gasp. But Curtiss said afterwards, "I felt sure of my ground all the time, for the long flat expanse of the Hempstead Plains presents ideal conditions for aviation." On July 17, Curtiss flew his plane almost twenty-five miles in nineteen circuits of a 1.3 triangular course. His average speed was a little less than thirty miles an hour.

This was the first of many flying firsts over the Hempstead Plains. To name a few—the first solo flight by a woman, Blanche

Stuart Scott, on September 2, 1910; the first airmail delivery when Earle Overton pushed a ten-pound sack of 640 letters and 1280 postcards between his knees and dropped it near the Mineola Post Office three miles from the Nassau Boulevard Airfield at Garden City; the first non-stop continental flight by John Macready and Oakley Kelley (it took them 26 hours and 50 minutes from Roosevelt Field to San Diego, California) and, of course, the first solo across the Atlantic with "Lucky Lindy" at the controls of the "Spirit of St. Louis." It lifted off Roosevelt Field at 7:52 A.M., May 20, 1927, after an agonizingly long run down the rain-soaked field. Today, all Long Islanders have is the name—Roosevelt Field.

Because early aviation was so much show, pilots took to the horse racing tracks with their ready-made runways and paying spectators crowding into the stands. A now famous international meet was held at Belmont Park in 1910. The Wright Brothers (Orville and Wilbur) came with an exhibition team and three new machines, although they did not participate in the flight to the Statue of Liberty. It was dangerous, they felt, flying over the towns. Glenn Curtiss was there with three new airplanes, including his first monoplane. C.K. Hamilton astounded people in the landing competition, putting his plane into a kind of nose dive at 250 feet, bringing it level at five feet and stopping on the line in front of the grandstand.

The Belmont Track had opened five years before on the "Little Plains," also known as the "Salisbury Plains," probably from a Captain Salisbury who seems to have been the manager of the Newmarket Race Course where the first organized racing in North America is supposed to have been run in 1664-1665. The Newmarket site was a short way from that of the later Belmont track and was near what is known as the railroad station in New Hyde Park. Governor William Nicoll had only a few months before finished seizing New Amsterdam (then New York) from the Dutch and then he turned his attention to starting this track where horses drove for the finish line for 150 years. The oldest existing racing trophy, now in the Yale University Museum, is a silver porringer inscribed, "1668, wunn at hamsted plaines, march 25.

But still there is that small trace of a question due to the intriguing line in Daniel Denton's account in 1670 of the plains,

"Toward the middle of the Island lyeth a plain 16 miles long and four miles wide where you will find neither stick nor stone to hinder the horse's heels, or endanger them in their races. Once a year, the best horses in the area are brought hither to try their swiftness." But Denton was writing this in London about Long Island before 1665. He refers to one race a year whereas there were two at Newmarket. So was there an earlier track and organized racing at Hempstead—a Hempstead Plains Course as it was called?

Whatever the case, horse racing became a popular activity on the plains—still is when one thinks of the Roosevelt Raceway with the trotters. But here is a case where horse racing took over from the planes, the raceway being located on what was Hazelhurst Air Field in World War I. This followed a time in 1940 when, it was said, "George Morton Levy, a local attorney and a few conferees look out at the flat Hempstead Plain and have a vision. What they see there on that broad stretch so filled with history is a track for night time harness racing."

That history involves the military. This dates to the Revolutionary War with an army enlistment center known as the "Hempstead Plains." It was located on the present site of Mitchel Field. By the War of 1812 it had become an infantry training post. It was Camp Winfield Scott during the Civil War and Camp Black in the Spanish-American conflict.

The 42nd Division, including the famous "Fighting 69th" Regiment, trained on the Mitchel Field site known during World War I as Camp Mills. The Army Signal Corps Aviation later took over. On July 16, 1918, the site was named for Major John Purroy Mitchel, a former New York City mayor.

What is left of the Hempstead Plains is a result of strict military security measures there. That anything is left of the Hempstead Plains is due to Mitchel Field being a guarded military base. The fences were a barrier against the raging development outside, the level, treeless terrain being preserved for the runways. Even the naturalists were kept out, although at least one, Ralph Cioffi of Glen Cove began peering through the fence in 1962 looking for the Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramis longicauda*) and Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), breeding birds of this habitat, these sparrows swaying on the grasses while sounding their insect-like

"zececees." Upland sandpipers (or upland plover, as they have commonly been called) provided a favorite hunting prey for sportsmen in the last century. One or two pair have been nesting in recent years in the area designated for the plains.

Cioffi writes in the newsletter of the Lyman Langdon Audubon Society of Manhasset that "over subsequent years my observations were limited to whatever could be seen through the fence from Hempstead Turnpike...It was not until May of 1965, however, that I felt activity at the field had subsided long enough for me to trespass. After entering the field I drove to the southeast corner, mainly because it seemed to be the most remote. Almost immediately upon leaving my car I flushed an Upland Plover. Shortly thereafter another plover flushed from its nest site. As I turned my attention to tracking down a sparrow, a security guard tracked me down. He said I was trespassing on federal government property and would have to leave immediately..."

"In May of 1966 I entered the field again but by that time certain areas were being used informally by the public for a variety of reasons so that I could observe the plover and sparrows with no difficulty." The next year he reported that the breeding plover seemed to have drifted to the north along the eastern boundary, "a site" which he said was "carpeted in one place by the little white violet with an occasional bird's-foot violet."

The white violet could have been any of ten species, but it was the blue one, the bird's-foot violet that dominated in May. "Truly the plains were blue with this delightful fragrant flower," recalls Marion Hunt Berg Homie of Old Field in her paperback book published in 1974, *Grandmother Burned Peachpits*. This is about Marion's growing up on a 45-acre farm on Hempstead Turnpike in East Meadow.

"People driving along the road could not resist stopping and gathering some," she writes. "We children soon realized that if we had some picked in reserve we could approach these travelers in a bashful but generous manner and proffer a bouquet all picked. Usually our efforts were rewarded by a few nickels or a dime and once in a while a quarter. How happy we were. Once I dropped my tiny purse with coins—sadness for hours until we found it! Even if we had no opportunity to give our bunches of violets to folks we were happy to take several handfuls to the house. We always had violets in the kitchen during violet time."

You couldn't pass the little bowl without burying your nose right in the middle of that delicious smell! I have eaten many a violet. Such nice feelings go with violets. Spring air—meadowlarks singing—tiny green leaves on new birch trees growing—and blue sky with a soft, soft wind."

BIRD'S-FOOT VIOLETS

In May,
before the Coliseum and bedroom towns
the prairie was celestial
with lavender petals of Bird's-foot Violets.

Today,
in a lot, I kneel
and smell the fragrance my mother knew
the days I ran home with bouquets
she snuggled her face into
and taking me on her lap,
told the story of why the leaves
are shaped like plovers' feet.

In 1980, the Nassau Board of Supervisors voted the bird's-foot violet as the official county flower—after the fact. For a number of years until 1978, naturalists were not finding these violets on Mitchel Field. Then Carole Neidich and Richard Ryder, biologists from the Nassau County Museum, discovered two small patches on land now proposed for part of the Marriott Hotel parking field.

The blue and white change to yellow as taller flowers come in competing with the taller growing grasses, blooms like the one-to-two-foot yellow rockets (*Barbarea vulgaris*) hawkweeds, sorrels and cinquefoils. Wayne G. Seyfert of Floral Park notes these changes in a study he did for a master's thesis at C. W. Post Center of Long Island University.

"The white becomes whitened in early summer," he reports. "The white sweet clover, Queen Anne's lace, yarrow, chickweeds, white campion, ox-eye daisy and fleabanes are responsible for the white coloration. The depthford pink, blue-eyed grasses (which are not grasses), blue curls, self heal and thistles color patches pink, blue and violet." With the onset of the various species of goldenrods, "the coloration of the field again returns to yellow."

Obviously, the Hempstead Plains has not always looked like this. Of 223 flowers, shrubs and trees listed for this and another Mitchel plot by Seyfert, 129 were native to America. Many of those from abroad probably got started when the thick, grassy root system that would have tended to keep introductions out, were broken up in the farming that began extensively late in the last century. The first of thirteen floral studies was that of Henry Hicks (of Hicks Nurseries fame) in 1892 when he found 126 vascular plants, only twenty of which had somehow been brought in from foreign countries.

What did the men clearing the land in 1641 for the townsite of Hempstead dig up? Certainly, thinks biologist Carole Neidich, the roots of bird's-foot violets and the white violets of spring. This is because they bloom before the grasses get started. Other flowers, especially the tall ones that tend to prevail over a wide area like the grasses, notably the goldenrods of which there are a number of species, would probably add their colors to green and then burnished hues of the grasses. But it was probably the grasses that dominated the scene causing so many descriptions comparing the Hempstead Plains to a sea such as that of Dr. Alexander Hamilton in 1744. Saying that "There is nothing but long grass upon this plain, only in some particular spots small oak brush." Hamilton says that "going across this great plain, we could see almost as good a horizon round us as when one is at sea..."

In the former days people could have looked back north across the prairie to the Ronkonkoma ridge rising like a backbone of "fish-shaped Paumanok." They would have experienced a sense of the glacial wall, melting back, an immense amount of water running out and spreading before it all this glacial debris brought down from New England and finally building up into an outwash plain running pretty much up and down the shore. But why in this one area should it have remained open? Why did it not fill with brush and finally trees like the oaks and others of the north shore hills and the red maple and beech forests that rose up south? Why was this area enclosed inside this impoundment of woods?

The treeless character probably has had much to do with its destruction. In winter, the masses of grassy stalks has a barren look—although this is beautiful. But because these grasses are high, people would become lost even with all the paths and roads

cut through by the 1800's. Little shelters were erected for the lost and tired to find rest in. So there was probably a sense of fear on the part of the early people.

It was easy to capitalize on this with the first great housing development, Garden City, which Alexander Stewart built over a large section of the plains. The advertising referred to his turning a "desert" into a garden. But even in the 1800's warnings were being made and all through the 1900's.

But it wasn't until Ralph Cioffi began reporting about the birds and flowers there that people got excited. Adrian Digman, a stockbroker and amateur wildlife photographer, took pictures of the flowers and the insects that crowd on them like the bees, various butterflies, wasps, and others. He took this on the road, showing his slides at bird clubs, church groups, and other interested gatherings.

The Long Island Chapter of the Nature Conservancy has been studying a sixteen-acre site that may prove to be the "best remaining example of plains habitat on Long Island" and indeed the entire state, according to Scott Sutcliffe, the chapter's Director. This is virtually a vanished habitat throughout New York as well as on Long Island.

This site is getting more attention than the acres some thirty-eight acres east of the Marriott Hotel that the Nassau County government supposedly had been holding for a possible future plains park. The plot of sixteen acres was discovered by Conservancy biologists in the fall of 1983 just north of Lindbergh Boulevard that cuts through Mitchel Field.

"At first glance we were hard pressed to be overwhelmed by the beauty of the site, hemmed in by the Nassau County Coliseum, the Marriott Hotel complex, and remnant aircraft runways of the defunct Mitchel Field Airport," says an anonymously written report in the Conservancy's July, 1984, newsletter—an article entitled "The Hempstead Plains: There's Not Much Left, But..."

"However," the article continues, "subsequent visits throughout the fall, winter and spring verified the extreme importance of this small lot. Indeed, if you stand at the site's western boundary at grass-height level, look east, and block out the peripheral buildings, a limited expanse of Hempstead Plains

will unfold before you. If you focus in on plant and animal species, you will be pleasantly surprised to identify many native plains grasses and wildflowers and even a few grassland bird species, such as the Grasshopper Sparrow.

"All of these natural experiences may be short-lived," the article continues, "if the property is developed—an undesirable alternative presented in the Nassau County Planning Department's *Generic Environmental Impact Statement*. At present, the Nature Conservancy is negotiating with Nassau County executives, requesting their cooperation in exploring alternatives to development."

From 60,000 acres to sixteen—but in this day of expansive development it is a connection with Long Island's past and people need roots.