Introduction

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If Queens had been an independent municipality in 2000, when the United States officially counted its citizens, it would have been the fourth-largest city in the nation, trailing only New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, and a bit ahead of Houston. At that time, it was half again as large as Philadelphia, twice as big as Detroit, and approximately as populous as Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Buffalo, and St. Louis combined. Within New York City, Queens is the largest of the five boroughs in area (110 square miles) and second only to Brooklyn in population.

But Queens is more distinctive for diversity than for size. Indeed, by most measures, Queens is the most heterogeneous place in the world. Although London had 2.2 million foreign-born citizens in 2000 (second only to New York City with 2.9 million), and although Miami had a larger proportion (more than 60 percent) of international residents, Queens has a larger proportion of foreign-born than London and a larger number of foreign-born than Miami.

The diversity of Queens can best be appreciated at the neighborhood level. Elmhurst, for example, counted immigrants from 110 countries in 2000, while Flushing had almost 100,000 Asian residents, most of them from China or Korea. Astoria has the largest Greek population outside the Mediterranean, Jamaica is mostly African American and Caribbean, and Richmond Hill has the largest population of Sikhs outside of India. Jews predominate in Forest Hills and Kew Gardens, while Italians give Howard Beach and Middle Village a distinctive character. And the 7 subway line passes through so many ethnic communities that it has been officially recognized as the “international express.”

Why then, if Queens is so populous, so large, and so diverse, is it so little known and understood even among those who live relatively close to it? In part, this circumstance derives from the fact that Queens is just one borough among the five that make up the city of New York. Moreover, all of the outer boroughs—Brooklyn, the Bronx, Staten Island, and Queens—are overshadowed by the skyscrapers, corporate headquarters, spectacular apartments, famous museums, and glamour and glitz of tiny Manhattan Island, the self-styled capital of capitalism and the world.

Second, the relative anonymity of Queens is a function of a quirk in U.S. Postal Service operations. In St. Louis, for example, a central post office handles

Carpenter's Tavern (1710) at Jamaica Avenue and 195th Street, Hollis, as it appeared in the late nineteenth century (Queens Library, Long Island Division, Illustrations Collection)

In 1949, Bell Boulevard in Bayside was a quiet road on which elegant homes were interspersed with small businesses like the Candy, Soda and Ice Cream Shack (Consolidated Edison Company of New York, courtesy Queens Library, Long Island Division, Illustrations Collection)

mail for both the city and many of its suburbs, so that a St. Louis address does not imply residence within the city. In New York City and Queens the opposite is true. New York, N.Y., means the island of Manhattan. And Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Staten Island also have a singular address for the entire borough.

Not so with Queens. The Postal Service divides the borough into five “towns” based roughly on governmental organizations that were in place in 1898 when the five boroughs came together as New York City. In Queens those five towns and the neighborhoods around them use as addresses those places—Long Island City, Jamaica, Flushing, Far Rockaway, and Floral Park—or, in some cases, the neighborhood name.

Thus, in a peculiar twist, Queens is not really a place in the usual American sense. It is not politically independent, it does not have a distinctive personality, it does not have a single post office address, and its sports teams are known by another moniker—the New York Mets rather than the Queens Mets, for example. Revealingly, Queens even has two of the most important airports in the world—John F. Kennedy International and La Guardia—but neither uses Queens in its name.

Moreover, perhaps more than in other places, residents of Queens identify with their neighborhood rather than with their borough or with the city as a whole. For decades, for example, the U.S. Open Tennis Championships were held in Forest Hills, New York, not in Queens or in Gotham.

This is not a big book. But it does have a big objective—to remind both residents and visitors that Queens is in fact one of the most exciting, most diverse, most American, and most promising places on earth. Fortunately, this is easy to do, especially because it has been written from the point of view of neighborhood

residents. And their insights are enhanced by the clear and careful maps of cartographers William L. and Colette Nelson.

History Before the Consolidation of 1898

Before 1524, when Giovanni da Verrazano became the first known white man to sail up the narrows in the lower bay, the place now known as Queens was home to various groups of American Indians, who lived near the bays and along the coast in what are now Flushing Bay, Douglaston, Jamaica Bay, and Little Neck Bay. None of these local Indian groups was as advanced as the Mayans, Incas, or Aztecs, who lived farther south in the Western Hemisphere. But these early inhabitants of Queens did cultivate wheat, maize, beans, and squash, which they combined with fish and assorted animals to provide a varied diet. Instead of teepees, they constructed long bark houses, replete with thatched domes of substantial size, to house many families at once.

In 1624 these original Americans were perhaps startled when the Dutch West India Company established a permanent settlement of European white people on Governors Island in the harbor. In 1625 the Dutch moved their tiny community to the southern tip of Manhattan, and in 1626 they presumably “bought” the island from the Indians.

Between 1636 and 1639 they turned their attention to Queens and made several land purchases from the natives, who probably did not understand that to Europeans land once bought could not be used again by the former owners. In any event, Dutch settlers began farming along the East River in what became the Hallets Cove and Dutch Kills areas. And after a series of military skirmishes with the native inhabitants in 1643, the Europeans had forced out the Indians by the middle of the seventeenth century. All that remains in the twenty-first century

The Weeping Beech, ca. 1930 (Courtesy of the Queens Library, Long Island Division, Postcard Collection)

of more than a millennium of Indian settlement are a few place names and trails that later became wagon roads and major automotive thoroughfares.

Although the Dutch were in control and gave the various Queens settlements their initial names, English settlers were more numerous in the area, and they resented the authority of the various Dutch governors, especially Peter Stuyvesant, who ruled New Netherland from 1647 to 1664. When Stuyvesant ordered the residents of Vlissingen (now Flushing) to deny to Quakers the opportunity to worship as they wished, he infuriated the local inhabitants and gave rise to the strongest statement of religious tolerance in all of American history—the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657. That document, now a precious treasure in the archives of the state of New York, formally protested against the ability of the government to interfere with the religious beliefs of citizens. Governor Stuyvesant arrested and fined several petitioners, prompting John Bowne to allow Quakers to worship in his home. When Bowne was subsequently imprisoned and then banished from the colony, he took his complaint to company headquarters in Amsterdam. They decided in favor of Bowne and ordered Stuyvesant to offer religious freedom in the colony. Bowne returned to America, and his home on Bowne Street is now a national landmark. And the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657 remains the most eloquent defense of religious freedom in all of American history.

In 1664, soon after Bowne's triumphant return, an English fleet, accompanied by 500 professional soldiers, appeared in the harbor. Stuyvesant, ornerly to the last, wanted to fight the invaders. But his citizens could see the powerful guns of the Royal Navy, and they knew that their little town could be blown to pieces in a military showdown. So, on September 8, 1664, with drums beating and flags flying, Stuyvesant surrendered Fort Amsterdam and the entire colony to the English. They immediately renamed the community New York, after the duke of

York, who later became King James II of England. The city then gave its name to the entire colony, which after independence became the "Empire State," as George Washington had foreseen.

In 1683, Queens became one of ten administrative subdivisions, or counties, in the province of New York. Queens took its name from Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese wife of King Charles II of England, and it originally included not only everything within its current boundaries but all of what is now Nassau County.

The Pennsylvania Drug store, located on the corner of Queens Boulevard and Continental Avenue, 1951 (Queens Library, Long Island Division, Illustrations Collection)

The century of English rule between 1664 and 1776 affected Queens only slightly. There were a few towns—Newtown, Flushing, and Jamaica prominent among them—but the population was mostly rural and the economy based on farming. Some families experimented with specialty crops. The Newtown Pippin apple, for example, became available after 1730, and this first American-grown apple soon became a luxury item suitable for export. And William Prince opened in Flushing the first commercial nursery for trees and plants in what would become the United States.

When revolutionary fervor swept the thirteen colonies in the 1770s, Queens remained mostly outside the debate, and if anything, its white population favored the British. New York City soon became the pivot for both royalist and revolutionary strategy, and Brooklyn was accordingly the scene, in August 1776, of the largest and most horrific battle of the entire Revolution. Queens did not play an important role in the contest, except that under the parliamentary Quartering Act, British soldiers could occupy private homes more or less as they pleased. Meanwhile, the Redcoats requisitioned livestock, stole produce, and used fence posts for fires. And when they left for good in 1783, they used Queens as a staging ground for the evacuation of Loyalists from all over America for resettlement in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and England.

After independence from George III was won in 1783, Queens remained a quiet district of small villages and isolated farms, and before 1830 the population of the entire county never reached as much as 10,000, even as neighboring Manhattan was passing Mexico City to become the largest metropolis in the Western Hemisphere, and rival Brooklyn was itself becoming one of the important cities in a growing nation.

The situation changed between 1830 and 1860, however, as the population of Queens quadrupled to more than 30,000. For one thing, railroads began arriving in 1836 and accelerated their coverage and service in the coming decades. For another, Queens became a place of suburban escape and urban recreation as new communities like Ravenswood developed after 1848, and as new racetracks and cemeteries gave New Yorkers reason to venture away from the congested city. Far Rockaway had even become a seaside resort for the affluent by the 1850s. Finally, Whitestone, Woodhaven, and College Point began attracting factories by 1860. And after the Civil War, three-mile long Newtown Creek, which divided Brooklyn and Queens, became one of the nation's busiest waterways as factories and warehouses lined its banks.

History Since Consolidation with New York City

In 1894 the residents of Queens County took part in a nonbinding referendum on whether to consolidate with the city of New York, which was then composed only of the island of Manhattan and a small part of Westchester County that was

Playing checkers in Clement Clarke Moore Homestead Park, Elmhurst

known as the Annexed District and which is now the South Bronx. Jamaica, Newtown, and Long Island City voted to be part of the greater city; Flushing, Hempstead, and other parts of eastern Queens were opposed. Overall, however, the consolidation measure passed, and on January 1, 1898, Queens became a borough within the city of New York. The easternmost towns became part of a new jurisdiction outside the city—Nassau County.

As a result of the consolidation of the five boroughs into one municipality, New York became the second-largest city in the world, after London, as well as the richest, most heterogeneous, and most dynamic human agglomeration on earth. Queens at the time was smaller and less important than either Manhattan or Brooklyn, but its population surged in the first two decades of the twentieth century, primarily because a series of transportation improvements gave it better connections to the giant metropolis across the East River. The Pennsylvania Railroad bought the Long Island Rail Road in 1900 and promptly electrified the tracks through Queens and opened new commuter tunnels under the river. Meanwhile, the new Queensboro Bridge opened in 1909 and gave access to Manhattan via automobile and trolley.

Most important, New York’s vast, efficient, and relatively cheap (five cents) subway system reached Hunters Point, Ozone Park, Woodhaven, and Richmond Hill in 1915 and Astoria, Corona, and Jamaica in 1917. With such easy access to the city, the population of Queens surged from 153,000 in 1900 to 469,000 in 1920.

But the most rapid growth was yet to come. During the 1920s, Queens was among the fastest-growing counties in the United States, and by 1930 the borough counted well over one million residents, or already more than Cleveland, Baltimore, Boston, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, or San Francisco would ever have. And along with more people, Queens spawned rich employment and recreational opportunities. It was the national center of production for the film industry, with about twenty studios there before the shift to Hollywood in the 1920s. It also had four airports and eighteen golf courses.

The Great Depression, which began with the stock market crash on Wall Street in October 1929, was as devastating to the city as to the nation as a whole. But huge public works projects, many of them directed by the greatest builder in American history, Robert Moses, added new transportation facilities, not to mention many thousands of jobs to the Queens economy. (In fact, it could be argued that Queens, more than any of the other New York boroughs, owes its current built topography to Moses.) The vast Triborough Bridge complex, together with the Grand Central Parkway from the bridge to Kew Gardens, opened in 1936, followed three years later by the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge and La Guardia Airport. And additions to the commuter rail and subway systems in Queens further solidi-

The Bronx-Whitestone Bridge

fied its status as a place of increasing importance.

Probably the most important, and undoubtedly the most exciting, event of the decade was the World's Fair of 1939–40. Located on a former ash and rubbish heap in what was later transformed into Flushing Meadows–Corona Park, the great exposition ultimately attracted 45 million patrons and was the largest such event ever held up until that time.

During World War II, Queens sent tens of thousands of its sons to the battlefields of North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific. After the Japanese surrender on September 2, 1945, the borough returned to the tasks it had always done so well, which were to provide homes, schools, parks, religious institutions, and economic opportunities for families that were linked by the desire to be happy, healthy, and successful. The Throgs Neck Bridge and the Long Island Expressway opened, blocks of four- and five-story apartment houses went up in Flushing, and single-family houses sprouted on former farms and golf courses. In 1964 Shea Stadium opened as well as the largest world's fair of the postwar period. This time more than 50 million people passed through the gates during its run. By 2000, well over two million people lived in the borough, which was unusual among urban political jurisdictions in the Middle West or Northeast in that the Queens population was larger at the turn of the millennium than it had been in 1950, even though its boundaries had changed not at all.

With maturity came important educational, artistic, and sports institutions. St. John's University, founded in 1870 by the Venetian Fathers, became one of the nation's largest and most prominent Catholic institutions after World War II, opening its major campus in Queens in 1955, while Queens College, established in 1937, similarly advanced in the postwar decades to become one of the elite colleges in the City University of New York system. Meanwhile, the borough gained notice as an artistic hub, with the American Museum of the Moving Image, the Socrates Sculpture Park, the Isamu Noguchi Museum, the Queens Museum of Art (which features the Panorama of New York City, created for the 1964 World's Fair), and the Museum for African Art receiving particular attention. Also impressive is the fact that since 1987 the Queens Library has maintained the highest circulation of any library in the United States.

Forest Hills Gardens

Diversity and the Future of Queens

But the most important fact about Queens is not its size or its cultural institutions or its library circulation statistics, although all are significant by any measure. Rather, the borough is distinguished by the fact that 44 percent of its population is officially foreign born. (No one knows how many undocumented immigrants live within its boundaries.)

More than other American places, Queens has been transformed by the Immigration Act of 1965, which overturned the more restrictive legislation that had prevailed since 1924. The borough, which had had the highest population of native-born in New York City as late as 1930, soon saw an influx of Asians and Latin Americans, with the largest number of newcomers from China, Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Jamaica, Korea, India, Haiti, and Ecuador.

The future of Queens is tied to the energy and aspirations of its people. For generations, the borough has offered newcomers opportunity, tolerance, and relative peace, which is all they have needed to establish a solid foothold. It is worth noting, for example, that Queens annually has fewer homicides than places like Atlanta, Memphis, New Orleans, Washington, and Baltimore, none of which is even a third as large as the underappreciated jewel of New York. To celebrate the history and meaning of Queens, then, is to celebrate the history and meaning of the United States. This book is only an introduction to its history, its treasures, and its people.

The fifty-story Citicorp building in Queens Plaza, the tallest building on Long Island