



A Brief History of Suffolk County

by Christopher R. Vagts

The history of Suffolk County has been profoundly influenced by the region's proximity to New England and New York City, and by the sea which defines its borders on three sides.

Occupying the eastern two-thirds of Long Island--which juts 120 miles into the Atlantic--the county covers over a thousand square miles of territory. It is 86 miles long and 26 miles at its widest point. The weather is temperate, water abundant, the soil good. And from the beginning there has existed a variety of conditions which have made this land good for all manner of living things.

The heritage of this area is a procession of all kinds of people over the past 10,000 years from Indians, explorers, pirates, and colonists, to invading armies, farmer-fishermen, railroad men, whalers, bootleggers, vacationers, spacemen, and commuters. Today a cosmopolitan mixture of 1,300,000 people live here.

The first nomadic hunters came here in the last glacial period following caribou herds when Long Island and the mainland of Connecticut were separated by only low-lying marshland. This area is now covered by the Long Island Sound.

With the passing of time and the warming of the earth, the glacier receded northward. The place we call Suffolk became home to thinking people who used tools, worked, and raised families, before the first kingdoms of Egypt were founded.

Most history books refer to thirteen Long Island tribes of Indians and then name them, such as the Montauk, Shinnecock, Nissequogue, etc. They were really not tribes, but simply large, extended family groups living in a common, loosely-defined territory. It was a very free nomadic life

with little social structure and little concept of land ownership.

The first known white men to sight Long Island were probably Norsemen. Careful interpretation of Viking sagas in recent years has produced evidence that some Norsemen--headed by a son-in-law of Leif Erickson named Karlsefni--sailed here and probably put in around Port Jefferson harbor in 1010 A.D. Karlsefni released two Irish slaves (gaels) who may have been the first Europeans to explore the Suffolk area. After that the best evidence we have tells us that it was Verranzano who next sighted Suffolk as he sailed along the south shore in 1524. Later, in 1614, Adrian Block, a Dutch explorer, touched the land nearby when he went ashore at Montauk and met with local Indians.

The first white settler was Lion Gardiner--a soldier--who came to this area from Connecticut in 1639 to start a plantation on land he purchased from the Earl of Sterling. His descendants still own Gardiner's Island off Suffolk's east end.

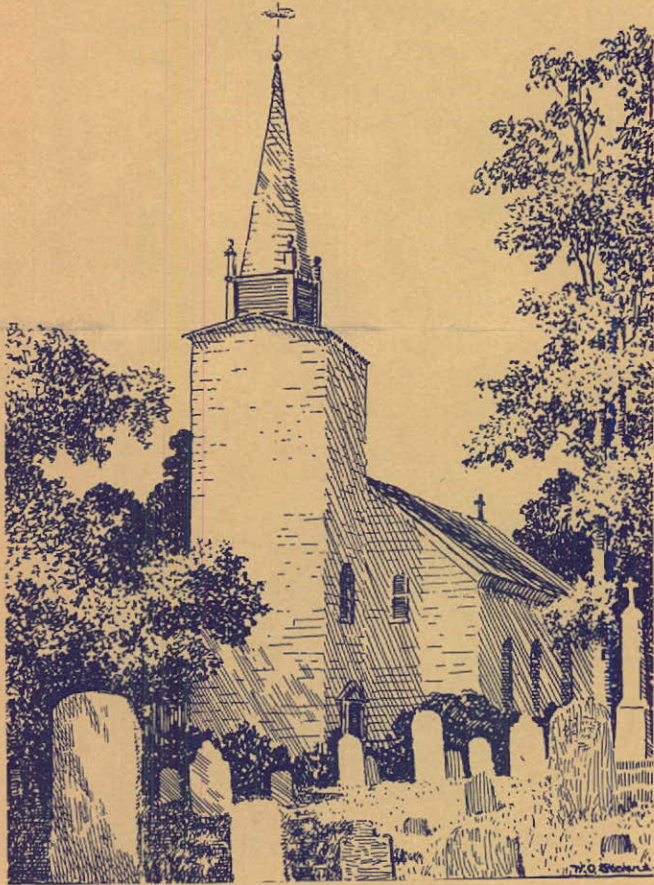
The first small bands of settlers came from New York and New England. Dutch villages sprang up on the western end of Long Island; English settlements in Suffolk. A power struggle between England and the Netherlands was settled in 1650 with a north-south line--an international boundary--dividing existing colonies in New England and Long Island.

Initially, the Indians of this region exchanged the use of their land for protection from their enemies by the Europeans who had guns and other things of value. The colonists, either misunderstanding or ignoring the concept of land use rather than ownership, claimed the Indian's land and denied them access to it. Part of this

was due to such natural things as the small-pox plague of 1662 which hit the Indians very hard. They were forbidden to come into towns for fear of pox and were forced to live in the outlying, less desirable surrounding areas. As the European population increased, native people were pushed further off traditional lands. They were also forced into farming as opposed to the hunting life.

The oldest English settlements in the Empire State were in what we call Suffolk, when families from New England established the towns of Southold and Southampton in 1640.

In 1648 nine families, mostly from Southampton, founded the Town of East Hampton and nine years later it was extended eastward to include Montauk.



CAROLINE CHURCH, SETAUKET

Shelter Island was settled in 1652. The island was first granted town privileges in 1666 but it was not designated a town until 1683.

The Town of Huntington dates its founding from 1653 when land was purchased from the Indians. Subsequent purchases during the next fifty years expanded the town area from the Sound to the Atlantic Ocean. In 1872 the southern portion split off to become the Town of Babylon.

The Town of Brookhaven was established in 1655 along the north shore from Stony Brook to Port Jefferson. Additional land acquisitions in succeeding years rounded out the present town. Patchogue and its environs became a part of the town in 1773.

Smithtown dates back to 1663 when Richard "Bull" Smith received a land bequest from Lion Gardiner to whom it had been given by Wyandanch. In 1665 a town patent was granted.

The Town of Islip was founded in 1710 following a series of large land grants, the first to William Nicoll in 1684 covering the eastern part of the town.

Riverhead Town was formed from the westerly part of Southold Town in 1792. As early as 1727 it was recognized as the County Seat when the County courthouse and jail were located there.

The colonial period from 1650 to 1775 was a peaceful time. Wild places and woodlands were turned to farms, and rough log shelters were improved to relatively comfortable homes. Churches, roads, grist mills, and shipyards were built. It was a time of hard physical labor, but here was land and homesites for most all who were willing to work. That excluded slaves and Indians in many places, but basically there was an atmosphere of freedom within the framework of a highly-ordered religious society. That tradition of freedom we revere and try to maintain in our own day as well!

By the 1670's the political and economic conditions in the colony of New York were deteriorating. Political unrest was growing from the continued refusal from the Duke of York to permit the colonists a legislative assembly and greater self-rule. One result was that collection of taxes had dwindled and people were openly refusing to pay them. The colony was in a hostile mood and the Duke of York had to face a painful decision: whether to continue ruling with an iron hand and face continued losses, or give away his rights for greater self-rule and in the hope of greater profit from the colony. William Penn, who was visiting England fresh from a trip to North America, counseled the Duke to give in and make some concessions to the colonists. The Duke was finally

persuaded to do this and from that persuasion this county--as we know it--developed.

The Duke of York sent a young Irish Catholic gentleman named Thomas Dongan. Governor Dongan convened the first assembly that had ever been gathered to represent the colonists soon after arriving here. The group sat for nearly three weeks from the middle of October until the first day of November, and out of those deliberations came a document entitled: The Charter of Liberties and Privileges Granted by His Royal Highness to the Inhabitants of New York and Its Dependencies. It really wasn't a charter, but rather an act of the legislature itself. It spelled out in clear language the principle that the sole legislative powers shall forever be, and reside in, a government council and the people met in general assembly. This Act of November 1, 1683 also established the County of Suffolk which has preserved representative government and roughly the same boundaries since then.

The open plains in the Hempstead and Montauk areas made Long Island the "Texas" of that time. It is estimated there were 100,000 horned cattle and even more sheep. So--Long Island was vital to New York City--supplying grain, meat, fish and cordwood.

Taxation was the cause which pushed peaceful farmers to first grumble--then rebel--and finally break with England.

Long Island was sharply divided in 1776 regarding independence from the Crown. About 80% of the people in Suffolk were committed to the Patriot cause, but this fervor diminished as one went toward New York City.

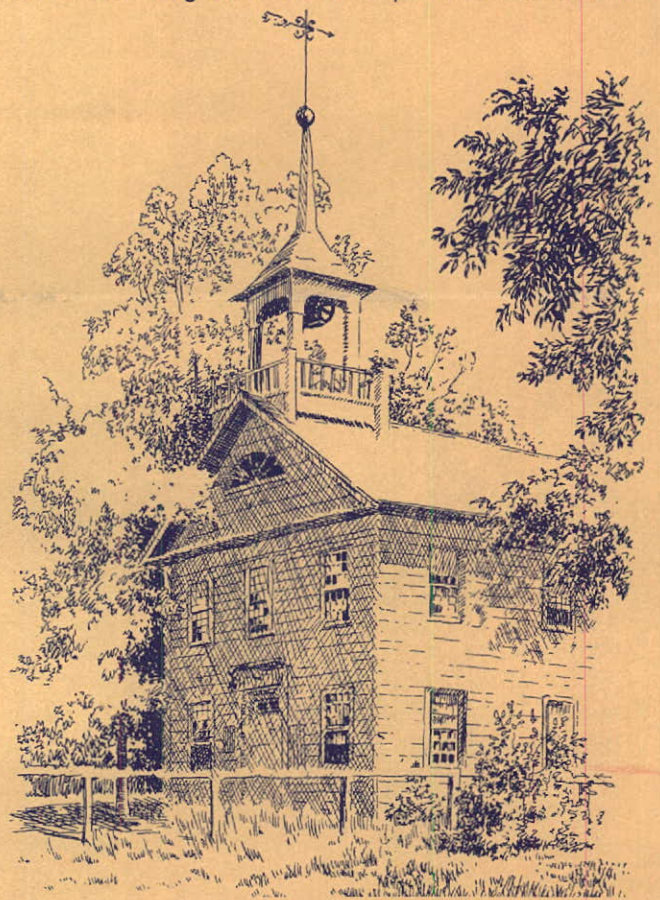
The disastrous defeat of the Americans at the Battle of Long Island in 1776 exposed the patriots in Suffolk to seven years of suffering under the occupation of British, Hessian, and Tory troops, supported by the mighty British Navy. The heavy commitment of forces reflected that New York City was the keystone of British plans to isolate New England from the middle Atlantic colonies and Long Island was the storehouse to feed and supply the City's garrison and naval forces.

Without patriot troops for protection the people here resisted--individually and in small bands--with ingenuity and daring. They spied, burned stores, engaged in illicit trade, helped whale boat raiders from New England, and

harassed the occupation troops. But not without heavy sacrifices in farms and property destroyed, families broken, and lives lost. They acted knowing the consequences--and they paid the price.

Nathan Hale is the best known of Washington's spies, but others were operating throughout the Revolution. Indeed, Suffolk was the center of the famed Culper espionage ring which kept General Washington informed of British activities in New York City. Information was carried by rider out to Setauket and then in moved across Long Island Sound to Connecticut by whale boat. From there it was relayed to the American forces in Westchester.

Peace was finally negotiated and the occupation troops--British and Hessian--departed in 1783. Farms in Suffolk were devastated, but the returning exiles and patriot soldiers



THE ACADEMY, MILLER PLACE

went to work restoring homes, fields, and shipping. The sea and the land yielded their bounty and prosperity returned. In this era, Suffolk's most enduring symbol--Montauk lighthouse--was constructed in 1796.

After the Revolution the question of owning slaves was debated. Shouldn't "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," be everyone's birthright? Slowly, change

Historic Suffolk County



- Picture map

came and in 1788 the State permitted the freeing of slaves. By 1799 gradual manumission was established.

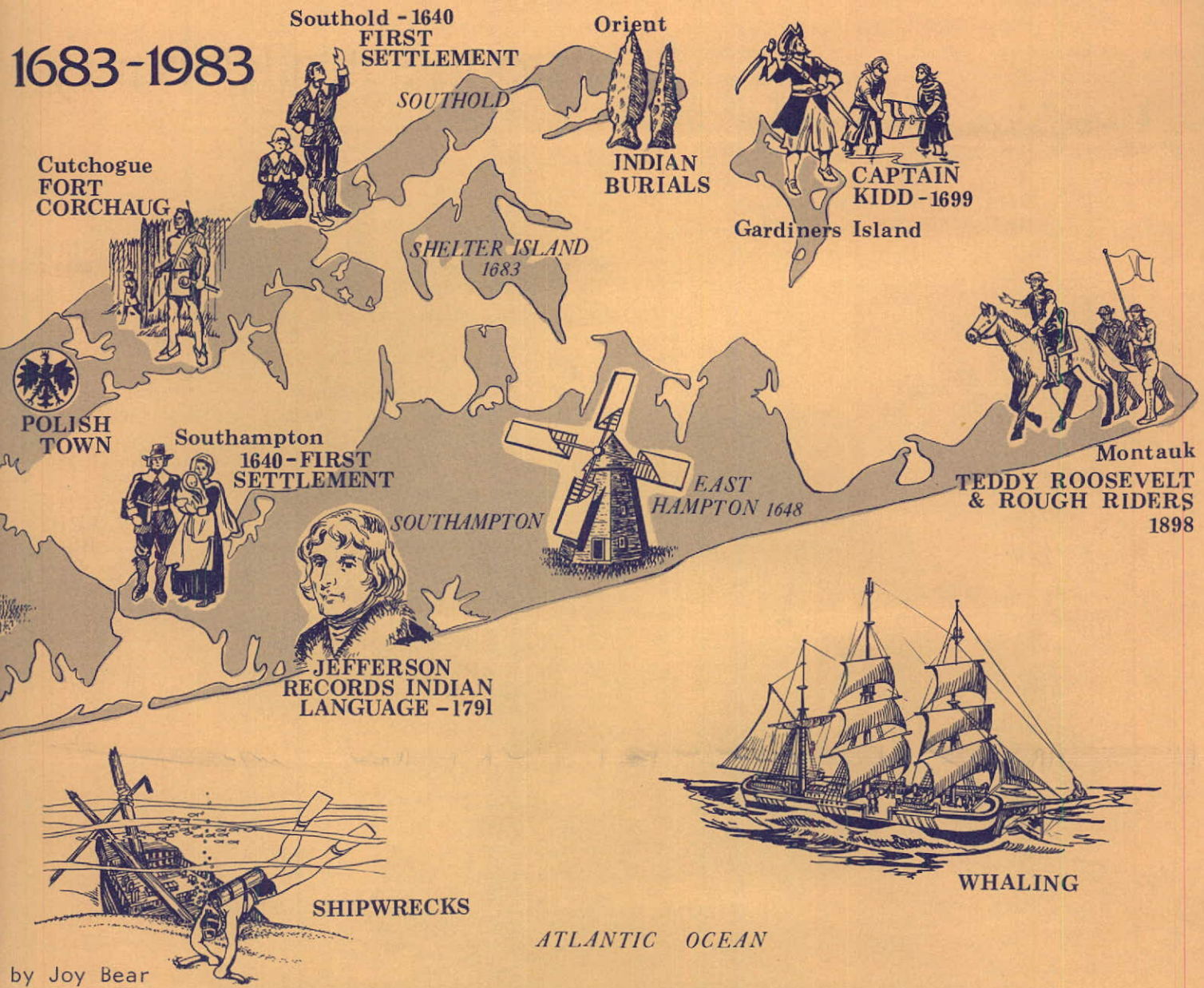
The War of 1812 intruded briefly on decades of peace. British frigates patrolled Long Island Sound and seized coastal sloops carrying the produce and cordwood of Suffolk bound for New York City. American privateers harassed the British. There were no land actions to speak of.

In 1834 men of industry--engineers and financiers--were looking for a quick railroad transportation route from New York to Boston. An engineering survey declared the Connecticut coastal route "impassable" because of the rugged hills and many rivers to cross. But, on the map between

the two cities lay Long Island, flat and cheap. And so was born that noble institution--the Long Island Railroad! Tracks were laid from the East River to Greenport at the east end of the county were a ferry took passengers and freight to Connecticut and then by train to Boston. The Long Island Railroad right-of-way went right down the middle of the island with no regular stops except to take on wood and water. It is ironic that the world's largest local railroad began with absolutely no thought of service to the people of Long Island.

Trains ran from the East River to Greenport as early as 1841, but not without trouble. Local residents did not take kindly to the noisy engines which frightened livestock and sent soot and hot em-

1683-1983



bers spewing over homes, fields and woodlots.

Farmers complained--but to no avail. Their frustration led to violence. Depots were burned, train crews ambushed, rails loosened, and tracks soaped, to slow down the "march of progress." But these efforts were no more successful than latter-day attempts to stop jet traffic with its pollution and noise.

What did bring a change in the Long Island Railroad's attitude was the completion of a direct rail connection between New York and Boston along the "impassable" Connecticut shore route in 1850. Suddenly the Long Island was a railroad without purpose and no place to go. Its tracks were

in the middle of the island and all its potential customers were settled in towns along the north and south shores.

In a short span of years, some twenty separate railroads came on the scene to connect people with the main line. It was a jumble of wheeling and dealing, violence, and conflict, that reflected--in microcosm--what was happening all across the nation. Suffolk was moving from an isolated agrarian society toward its place in an interdependent industrial economy.

As the railroad took its first steps, another of our principal industries--whaling--was reaching its heyday. By 1840 the off-shore whaling which Indians and settlers had practiced had expanded to a world-wide search

for the great beasts. Ships set forth from Cold Spring Harbor, Sag Harbor, and Greenport, returning three years later with precious cargoes of oil, wax, and bone. But the bottom dropped out when rock oil--petroleum--was brought in by Colonel Drake. Whaling declined, but not before the seafaring ruffians and salty captains had added their imprint to our heritage.

Long Islanders were active in the clipper trade too. And seven ducks brought to Riverhead from China in 1873 formed the initial basis for our present-day 25-million-dollar-a-year Long Island (Peking) duck industry.



HOOK MILL

The lure of the sea, aided by a railroad looking for customers, soon established Suffolk's hallmark as an ideal place for recreational escape for sailing and bathing at the county's famous beaches. By the Turn of the Century a network of stagecoach, trolley, and excursion boat lines linked the LIRR to large seaside hotels where "city folks" could spend two weeks rocking on the front porch. This was perhaps the last sedentary vacation Americans enjoyed, for the greatest change agent was at hand--the automobile.

First a rich man's toy, they permitted exploration and then establishment of "castles" for the wealthy on the North Shore. Later, cars drove middle class working families east to vacation homes and then year-round settlements.

A roadside culture of refreshment stands, filling stations and quick food eateries developed as asphalt and concrete roads pushed out from population centers. The forerunner of modern superhighways was also founded here in 1908 with the opening of Motor Parkway built by William K. Vanderbilt.

In the early 1900's, the county's flat, open spaces, and its location between New York City and Europe, made it a natural center for efforts to establish cross-Atlantic aviation and "wireless" communication. Grumman and other aviation pioneers made this a major center of aircraft production serving the nation through two World Wars and in its pioneering ventures to the Moon and beyond.

Suffolk County was touched by larger events in 1917 when America went to war "to make the world safe for democracy." One of the largest installations for turning citizens into soldiers was at Camp Upton in Yaphank where men from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, were trained for duty with the AEF in France. The 40,000 men who spent time at Camp Upton doubled the population of Suffolk County in 1917.

Suffolk County's heritage has been built by many different kinds of people. It has been built by people of daring like Benedict Arnold and Nathan Hale--opposites, but both fierce patriots--people as artistic as Walt Whitman and William Sidney Mount of Setauket--people as inventive as Einstein or Marconi. Some of these were lifetime residents; others came for just the summer. Some did great work; others did things as inconsequential as Mile-a-Minute Murphy, whose contribution to culture was to ride a bicycle behind a Long Island Railroad train at sixty miles an hour. These are the people that make up a local history that reflects--in a very real sense--what was happening in America as a whole.

But the steady population growth--especially in recent years--came not from daring deeds nor artistic genius. Rather it has been based on thousands upon thousands of common folk deciding that Suffolk was the place to make a home and raise a family. The progress of Suffolk County will continue so long as these things continue to exist and we work to make good things happen here.



PLACES TO VISIT

Suffolk County Historical Society
300 West Main Street
Riverhead, L.I., N.Y. (271-2881)

Suffolk County Marine Museum
Montauk Highway
West Sayville, L.I., N.Y. (567-1733)

Museums at Stony Brook
Rt. 25A
Stony Brook, L.I., N.Y. (751-0066)

Museum of Long Island Natural Science,
Earth & Space Sciences Building, SUNY at
Stony Brook, Stony Brook, N.Y. (246-8373)

READING LIST

Bunce, James E. & Harmond, Richard P.,
Long Island as America, Port Washington:
Kennikat Press, 1977.

Failey, Dean F., Long Island is My Nation,
Setauket: SPLIA, 1976.

Levine, Gaynell S., Readings in Long Island
Archaeology & Ethnography, 4 volumes:
Vol. I-Early Papers in L.I. Archaeology
Vol. II-The Coastal Archaeology Reader
Vol. III-History & Archaeology of the
Montauk Indians
Vol. IV-Languages & Lore of L.I. Indians
S.C. Archaeological Assn.

The Long Island Forum published monthly by
Friends of L.I. Heritage, Carl Starace,
Editor, 1864 Muttontown Road, Syosset,
N. Y. 11791.

Local histories are available for many
towns and villages. Visit the "Weather-
vane Shop" at Suffolk County Historical
Society, 12:30 - 4:00 P.M., Monday thru
Saturday, 300 W. Main Street, Riverhead,
N.Y.

About the Author

Christopher R. Vagts has been
Suffolk County Historian since
1976. He is a life-long resi-
dent of Long Island and a local
history enthusiast. He has com-
pleted doctoral studies in Mass
Communications at NYU, and served
as Superintendent of Schools in
Huntington, New York. Currently
he heads a consulting and communi-
cations firm on Long Island.

SUFFOLK COUNTY GOVERNMENT

The government of Suffolk County con-
sists of an elected executive with his staff
and eighteen elected representatives who com-
prise the S.C. Legislature.

SUFFOLK COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Honorable Peter F. Cohalan

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

William C. Richards, Presiding Officer
(Legislative District No. 7)

Gregory J. Blass
(Legislative District No. 1)

John Rosso
(Legislative District No. 2)

John J. Foley
(Legislative District No. 3)

John F. Sorli
(Legislative District No. 4)

Ferdinand Giese
(Legislative District No. 5)

Donald Allgrove
(Legislative District No. 6)

John C. Wehrenberg
(Legislative District No. 8)

Joseph Rizzo
(Legislative District No. 9)

Michael J. Grant
(Legislative District No. 10)

John P. Finnerty, Jr.
(Legislative District No. 11)

Anthony Noto
(Legislative District No. 12)

Patrick Halpin
(Legislative District No. 13)

Louis Petrizzo
(Legislative District No. 14)

Wayne Prospect
(Legislative District No. 15)

John J. O'Neil
(Legislative District No. 16)

Jane Devine
(Legislative District No. 17)

Robert Mrazek
(Legislative District No. 18)



SCOPE

Published for the S.C. Tercentenary (1683-1983)

under the auspices of:

Hon. Peter F. Cohalan - S.C. Executive
William Richards - Presiding Officer,
S. C. Legislature

John G. Chester - Commissioner of Parks

John J. Fagan, Jr. - Exec. Director, SCOPE

Robert David Lion Gardiner - Chairman,
S.C. Tercentenary Commission

- Sketches by William Oliver Stevens from
Discovering Long Island, Dodd, Mead
and Company, Inc.

