

*Don't Dohy to Yaphank Historical Society*

# **The Early Years in Middle Island, Coram, Yaphank & Ridge**



Prosser's Cathedral Pines, on road to Yaphank.

Largest white pine forest on Long Island. First trees planted by Uncle Billy Dayton in 1812. Now owned by the Suffolk County Park Commission. Open to the public in the summer.

'Tis God's Cathedral, Minister, Choir;  
The singing pines are harp and lyre;  
In Prosser's woods I voice a prayer,  
And worship God and nature there."

Walter Beverly Crane

By Thomas R. Bayles  
1973



Pfeiffer's store in Middle Island stood where the Shell gas station is now located just west of the traffic light. This store was in operation for 150 years and supplied everyone for miles around. This was the social center of the locality and the post office was located here.



Lopped trees, about 200 years old, made by repeatedly pruning young oak trees and bending them over, thus forming living fences for cattle.

The first settlement in Brookhaven town was made at Setauket in 1655, which was the headquarters of the town for over 100 years. Between 1730 and 1750 settlements were made along the Middle Country road in Coram, Middle Island and Ridge, and farms were cleared and homes built. This mid-island area had been used before that as a hunting ground by the roving bands of Indians, who had their camps on the north and south sides of the Island near the water.

As settlement began to be made on the south side in the Mastic area after 1700, it was found to be too long a trip to the town headquarters in Setauket, so a more central place was chosen at Coram, and the home of Lester H. Davis was used for this purpose for over 100 years until 1885. It was here the annual town meetings were held in April, and the voters came from all over Brookhaven town in horse drawn wagons. Town meeting day was an important event in the lives of the people, and here horses were swapped, news of the day discussed, and a social good time enjoyed by all. Dinner was served in the town house for 50 cents, but most of the farmers brought their lunch. Voting lasted until sundown, when one of the justices stepped out on the front porch and called out, "Hear ye, hear ye; these polls are now closed." Counting the votes often lasted until midnight or later, and the shaded oil lamps threw a dim light over the table and the interested candidates stood looking over the shoulders of the election workers. In 1884 it was voted to divide the town into election districts, and this was the end of the "town meeting days in Coram."

The first church was a Baptist church built in 1747 in Coram, on the site of the present Methodist church. This church stood for about 100 years, but little is known about it except the old graveyard across the road that contains the graves of many of the first settlers of Coram. In 1841 a Methodist church was built in Middle Island, adjoining the old graveyard across from Tommy Lynn's store. This church was moved to Coram in 1858 and stands on the site of the old Baptist church and a new church built on the road to Yaphank.

The first Presbyterian church was built in Middle Island in 1766, with Rev. David Rose as pastor, who was also the pastor of the South Haven church until his death in 1799. He was an interesting figure as he covered his immense parish on horse back, with his saddle bags filled with Bibles and medicine, as he was also a doctor. In 1837 the present church was built just to the rear of the old one, and served the community for 200 years until the new Christian Education building was built at Longwood in 1966, and the old church stands vacant. The first schoolhouse built in 1813 stood just east of the church.

The cemetery across the road from the church was opened about 1766 and incorporated in 1869, and reincorporated in 1960 as the Union Cemetery Association of Middle Island. This cemetery is open to all without regard as

to race, creed or color. The oldest stone in the cemetery is that of Daniel Brewster, who died in 1748.

Middle Island has the oldest post office in Brookhaven town, which was established in 1796 with Apollus Wetmore as first postmaster. This was first called Middletown, then Brookhaven, and in 1811 was changed to Middle Island when Benjamin Hutchingson became postmaster. He kept the post office in his home where Leo Lentin's home is located, across the road from his dress store. The post office was in the Hutchinson family until 1901 when Edward Pfeiffer was appointed postmaster, and until the new post office was built in 1964, it was located in Pfeiffer's store.

About 1830 mail was dispatched from the city by stage coach to Coram, Middle Island and Riverhead twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday at 8 a.m. In those days the receipts of the Middle Island post office were less than \$20 a year. Most letters were sent postage collect on delivery.

The old Hutchinson homestead, which stood where Kogel's cement mix plant is located, was built about 1750 and had a long and colorful history. The Brookhaven Town clerk's office was here for about 40 years until 1890. It was also the voting place for Middle Island, Coram and Yaphank for many years. It was a stage coach stop for the stages that ran along the Middle Country road from the city to the east end villages before the railroad was opened to Greenport in 1844. It was also the Middle Island post office from 1834 to 1901.

During the stage coach years, the arrival of the mail stage coach was an important event, and a villager who had been "down to York" was called on for a week to tell what he had seen in the great city. The stage coach driver was an important man and was entrusted with many errands by the people along the route. Hull Conklin was a driver of the stage line from Brooklyn to Orient, and made two trips a week, always on time.

Pfeiffer's store was located just east of the traffic light, where the Shell gas station is now. The house adjoining Pfeiffer's store was built about 1735 by one of the grandsons of Rev. Nathaniel Brewster, the first minister of the old town church in Setauket in 1665. This was also a tavern and stage coach stop and mention is made of it by Dr. Hamilton in his trip through Long Island in the summer of 1744. We quote from his diary - "We arrived at one Brewster's (Pfeiffer's store in later years) at eight o'clock at night and could get nothing to eat or drink in this house, so were obliged to go to bed fasting and supperless." He and his party had come from Setauket, and the next morning, continued on their journey to Riverhead.

Pfeiffer's store was in operation for over 100 years, and was a typical country store that supplied nearly all the wants of the people for miles around. The farmers brought in their butter and eggs and traded them for groceries and other supplies. The country store carried everything in the years gone by, and

among the articles sold, besides groceries, were dry goods, men's and women's clothing, boots and shoes, (felt boots were popular) paint, hardware, crockery, feed and fertilizer, and almost anything one could think of. In the back room hung smoked hams and bacon, and the salt pork barrel, the molasses barrel, vinegar barrel etc. The country store and post office was a meeting place for everyone, and around the old pot bellied stove gathered the men and boys to play checkers and be sociable. The old checker board had long since been laid away on a shelf to dram of the days it was kept in daily use, when the local firemen burned down the old store for the new owners to make way for a Shell gas station three years ago. This was the beginning of the transition from a quiet farming community to an urban development of homes, apartment houses, banks and gas stations. The old center of social life will never be replaced.

Artist Lake used to be called Corwin's pond, as Rev. Jacob Corwin lived nearby. He was one of the first pastors of the Wading River Congregational Church, organized in 1785, and was also the first pastor of the New Village (Centereach) Congregational Church in 1815.

The will of James Swezey, who lived near Half Mile Pond, or Pine Lake, as it is now called is interesting. This was made in 1778, and in those years careful distribution was made in wills of feather beds, pillows, tongs, irons, etc. as they were highly valued. One item of this will reads as follows. "I will that my sons Isaac and James provide and keep a good milch cow for my wife during her life, if she remains my widow so long." Apparently she lost the cow if she remarried.

The artist Alonzo Chappel, lived east of Artist Lake, (which was named after him) near where White's store is now located. He painted the plates for the illustrations in many of the books published by Martin, Johnson & Fry, among which were "Spencer's History of the United States," "The National Portrait Gallery", "Duyckink's History of the Civil War" and many others.

Another house built before the Revolution is the old Ashton homestead on the East Bartlett road, which was the home of Major Leek and his family during the Revolution. One day a party of British soldiers stopped and demanded that Mrs. Leek make dinner for them. While waiting, one of the officers went around the dining room hitting the sides of the room with his sword to see if there were any hollow panels behind which might be concealed valuables. Mrs. Leek held her breath because there was a small opening on one side of the fireplace, and behind this was a box built into the chimney where they had hidden all their silver and other valuables. The officers passed this by and did not discover the hiding place. The original part of this house had a chimney twelve feet square, with three fireplaces downstairs and two upstairs.

Another incident during the revolution took place at the  
smith Davis in Coram, (now the home of Lester H. Davis). A company of  
British soldiers came to his home and demanded some information from Mr.  
Davis, which he refused to give them, so they took him and tied his feet to  
the windlass of the well and left him hanging there with his head down. After  
the soldiers left, one of the women of the family, who had been watching from  
a hiding place, ran for a neighbor, who helped release him from certain death.

The Connecticut or Carman's (now called) river used to rise in Pfeiffer's  
pond in Middle Island and flow down through Yaphank and into the Great South  
Bay at Brookhaven. Several mills were located on this river, among which was  
the old fuling mill in 1792, north of Yaphank, the Upper Mill at Yaphank, built  
in 1739, and Gerard's Mill or Lower Mill, built in 1771. The diary of Minerva  
Hutchinson in 1808 says, "At night our rolls were brought home from the card-  
ing mill down the river. Very good rolls. I began to spin them." "Carded  
mixed wool for stocking yarn after breakfast by candle light."

Prosser's Cathedral Pines is located on the road to Yaphank, and is the  
largest white pine forest on Long Island. The oldest trees were planted by  
"Uncle Billy Dayton" in 1812. The property is now part of the Suffolk County  
Parks, and is open to the public in the summer.

Yaphank was first called Millville, but was changed to Yaphank when  
the post office was opened. Yaphank is an Indian name meaning the bank of  
a river. The railroad was opened through Yaphank to Riverhead and Greenport  
in 1844, and this event was a great day in the lives of the people through this  
area, as now a trip to the city could be made in two hours with the iron horse,  
where it had taken two or three days with the stage coach. Prime, in his his-  
tory of Long Island in 1845, has this to say. "But, until the people beheld  
with their own eyes, the cumbrous train of cars drawn by the iron horse, sput-  
ting forth smoke and steam, passing like a steed of lightning through their  
forests and fields with such velocity they could not tell whether the counten-  
ances of the passengers were human, celestial or infernal, they would not be-  
lieve that a railroad had the power almost to annihilate both time and space."

There was considerable activity in Yaphank around the mid 1850's, as  
the Presbyterian church was built in 1851, the Episcopal church in 1853, a  
Baptist church in 1853, which was moved to Port Jefferson about twenty years  
later, the famous octagonal schoolhouse in 1854, used until 1926, and the  
county home property purchased in 1871. The first schoolhouse was located  
about one quarter mile north of Swezey's corner on the road to Middle Island.  
This was built shortly after the district was formed in 1813.

In 1875 Yaphank was a busy village and had 2 grist mills, 2 lumber  
mills, 2 blacksmith shops, 1 printing office, 1 upholstery shop, 1 stage line,  
2 doctors, 1 shoe shop, 1 lumber yard, 2 wheelwright shops, 1 meat market,



The Lower Mill in Yaphank, built in 1771.

The farmers from miles around brought their grain to be ground into flour, and logs from their forests to be sawed into timber. The miller received three quarts of each bushel of grain as pay for grinding.



Middle Country Road, Coram

Looking east on the Middle Country Road in Coram in 1900, from about where the firehouse is now. Grant's shopping center now located on the right.

1 dressmaking shop, 1 general store - according to the book by Beecher Homan, "Yaphank As It Is And Was" published in 1875.

The Yaphank railroad station was an important train order office as well as freight station, with an agent and operator on duty. Now all the stations between Ronkonkoma and Greenport have been removed, except Riverhead, and there is only one train each way daily.

The first settlement of Ridge was made in 1728 by Stephen Randall, who occupied the farm on the Whiskey road, east of Leisure Village, which in more recent years was the home of John G. Randall. Ridge was called Randallville for years as practically all of the residents were Randalls.

The first schoolhouse was located in the hollow south of the Middle Country road, opposite the State Game Farm. In 1872 a schoolhouse was built up the hill, which was used on Sundays for religious services by the Middle Island Presbyterian Church for many years.

An immense tract of land was purchased from the Indians in 1691 by Col. William Smith, which extended from the present Middle Country Road to the ocean, and was called the Manor of St. George. The north part of this was called Longwood, and the Smith Homestead was built on it in 1790 which has been the home of the Smith family for generations past. The last member of this historic family to live there was Elbert C. Smith and his family. He gave the 50 acres on which the Longwood High School is located, also the six acres for the Middle Island Presbyterian Church, and the site of the Lutheran Church on Smith Road. After his death, the 800 acres remaining was sold to Levitt's and is being developed with homes.

The first post office was established in August 1949, with Salvatore Calabrese as the first post master. In 1951 the new school on Ridge Road was built on a 15 acre tract of land donated by the New York State Game Farm.

Cutting and shipping cordwood was an important industry in Ridge and Middle Island for nearly a hundred years up to 1900. Thousands of cords of wood were cut every winter on the farms and hauled over to the Sound where it was piled in long piles on the bluffs. During the spring and summer the wood was loaded on sloops that came close to the shore at high tide, and when the tide went out the wood was hauled across the beach and loaded on the boats. When the tide rose again the boats floated and sailed down the Sound to New York and up the Hudson River to Haverstraw, where the wood was burned in the brick yards in curing brick. The only reminder of this once important business are the old landing roads leading to the Sound shore.