

Origin of the Name *Syosset*...Solved?

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For more than a century and a half, Syosset residents have debated the origin of our community's name, most upholding the conviction that it is a tribute to the Native Americans who first settled this area -- others maintaining that the name is based on a word of Dutch origin. Recently, I had the opportunity to delve into these opposing theories with the assistance of Town of Oyster Bay Historian, John Hammond. After examining a series of 17th Century documents, old maps, and other historical records, I believe I have finally arrived at a definitive conclusion.

Background

A well-known 1911 book by Algonquin historian William Wallace Tooker entitled *The Indian Place Names On Long Island* did little to unravel the "Syosset" mystery by first stating that the name is of Indian derivation, then contradicting itself by explaining that it had evolved from the Dutch word, *Schouts*. Despite the ambiguity of Tooker's explanation, generation after generation continues to believe that the name must have *some* Native American origins.

SUMMER ARRANGEMENT.
Rail Road Stge.
FOR COLD SPRING & HICKSVILLE

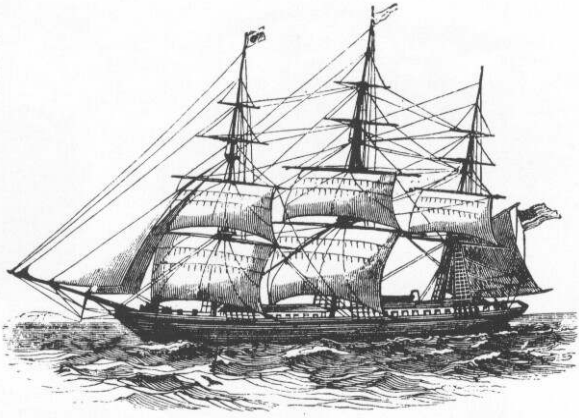


ON and after Monday,
May 1, a STAGE
will leave Cold Spring,
every day, (Sundays excepted) at half past
5 o'clock, A. M., and 11 o'clock, A. M., stop-
ping at East Woods, at a quarter before 6,
A. M., and quarter before 12, M.

Because Syosset was never officially incorporated as a village, there is no entry in the Town of Oyster Bay records denoting exactly *when* our community took on its present name. However, it is evident from archived newspaper articles and advertisements that the official call on the name change was made by the Long Island Rail Road Company, when it extended its main line to our hamlet in 1854. Interestingly, between 1846 and 1848, the hamlet we now know as *Oyster Bay* used the name "Syosset" for reasons outlined below. As seen in the 1853 stage coach ad to the left, prior to this time, what we now call "Syosset" was known as "East Woods." To understand how the name *Syosset* came into use, we need to go back to the 1600s, when Long Island was

the subject of an ownership dispute between the Dutch and the English.

A Simple Mistake?



When the Dutch arrived here during the early 17th Century, they named what is now Oyster Bay “Schout’s Bay,” which translates roughly to “Sheriff’s Bay.” Subsequently, the English arrived at the same harbor and established a settlement *they* called *Oyster Bay*. The Dutch had not authorized this settlement and, after unsuccessfully demanding that the English at Oyster Bay pledge allegiance to the governor of New Netherlands, set out to dissolve the English colony. An entry in the New York State Historical Records describes the confrontation that ensued:

“On the 13th of May, 1640, [Governor] Kieft sent Cornelius Van Tienhoven, his Secretary, with the under-sheriff, a sergeant, and twenty-five soldiers, to Schouts Bay, on Long Island, to break up a settlement which the English had begun at that place.”

The Dutch pronunciation of the “sch” sound, much like the Hebrew pronunciation of “ch,” was difficult for English-speaking people to recreate, being produced by placing an “s” in front of a sound that can best be compared to the sound made when clearing a small crumb from one’s throat. This may explain why a widely circulated history of New Netherlands written two hundred years later by William Dunlap misprinted the passage as:

*“On the 13th of May, 1640, Kieft sent Cornelius Van Tienhoven, his Secretary, with the under-sheriff, a sergeant, and twenty-five soldiers, to **Siocits Bay**, on Long Island, to break up a settlement which the English had begun at that place.”*

The misspelling of “Schouts” in this 1839 passage may have simply been the result of a misheard consonant or two; or it could have been the effect of two hundred years of evolution on the original word. Regardless, from that point forward, residents of Oyster Bay hamlet believed the original name of their community had been *Siocits*, which, through additional misinterpretations and misprints (“Siocit,” “Syocit,” “Syossett”), eventually became “Syosset.” Perhaps due to this word’s similarity to “Suwasset” (the name originally used by Native Americans for Port Jefferson), “Syosset” was widely believed to have also been of Indian origin.

The “First” Syosset

In the mid 1840s, a situation arose which prompted Oyster Bay citizens to revisit what they believed was their hamlet’s original name. Much of the mail delivery during this period was via the LIRR’s Hicksville station, from which a private stage coach service would cart letters to East Woods, Oyster Bay, and other surrounding areas. One stop along the stage driver’s route was a place known as “South Oyster Bay,” the original name for Massapequa. As you might suspect, mail intended for residents of *Oyster Bay* often ended up in *South Oyster Bay*, sometimes never to be recovered.



Oyster Bay, L. I.—Oyster Bay is no more it is swallowed up in the title of Syosset, its old Indian name. The Courier and Enquirer congratulates its villagers on discarding its tasteless name.' Oysters tasteless! We cannot mention the name without having the flavor of one of the fine oysters natives, to the mud bed born, in our mouth. Nevertheless, Syosset is much more poetical, and it is a consolation that, though we shall no longer have an oyster bay, we shall still have an abundance of oysters.

In 1846, prominent residents of Oyster Bay hamlet petitioned the US Post Master General to rename their post office in order to end confusion with its namesake on the south shore. After much debate, the Oyster Bay constituency decided to honor its assumed Native American heritage and rename the community "Syosset."

When the Postmaster General made the name change to "Syosset" official, newspapers across Long Island congratulated the residents of Oyster Bay for losing their unappealing name and

reclaiming their Indian roots.

One year later, a US Coast Survey map of Long Island identified the harbor adjacent to the former Oyster Bay as "Oyster or Syosset Bay." A subsequent Colton map labeled the village "Oyster Bay or Syosset."

Meanwhile, within the community formerly known as Oyster Bay, there was bitterness between those who had successfully lobbied for the name change and those who felt they should have been consulted before such a drastic step was taken. In 1848, a large delegation of the village's residents voted to restore the old name of *Oyster Bay*.

OYSTER OR SYOSSET BAY

Founded upon a Trigonometrical Survey

under the direction of F. R. HASSLER Superintendent of the
SURVEY OF THE COAST OF THE UNITED STATES

Triangulation by E. BLUNT Assistant

Topography by A. D. MACKAY Lt. U. S. A. and F. H. GERDES Asst.

Hydrography by the party under the command of

Lieutenant G. S. BLAKE, U. S. Navy

Published in 1847

The (Real) "Syosset" Connection



This might have been the end of the name "Syosset" had the Long Island Rail Road not agreed, in 1854, to extend its main line from Hicksville to Cold Spring Harbor. LIRR planners determined that the most direct route for this extension would be through the sparsely populated farming community commonly known as *East Woods*. Ultimately, the project stalled, but not before track had been laid as far as Willis Avenue, just west of today's Jackson Avenue. In the end, the out-of-the-way farming village between Hicksville and Cold Spring Harbor became the terminus of the LIRR's new branch. To ensure that its efforts would not be wasted, the LIRR decided to establish an official stop in this community, but first needed to confirm its proper name.

While most identified the hamlet as *East Woods*, some referred to it as *Ketchams*, after a well-known merchant from the area. Others called it *Locust Grove*, a name that had been used to describe the area just north and south of Jericho Turnpike. Still others referred to the area as *Buckwheat*, a reference to the buckwheat fields that skirted the new train tracks. Ironically, even with all the new information available, unraveling the reason for the railroad's choice of "Syosset" requires some speculation.

Because East Woods did not appear capable of supporting a railroad station on its own, it is logical that the LIRR wanted (and needed) to draw farmers and businessmen from the closest established community. In keeping with its typical method of assigning station names, the LIRR likely consulted the most recently produced maps, which still listed the nearest large village as "Oyster Bay or Syosset." Several businesses and organizations formed in Oyster Bay during the period of 1846-1848, in fact, still attached the name "Syosset" to themselves, and many Oyster Bay residents had continued to call the hamlet "Syosset" for years after the name change was reversed.

Ultimately, the railroad company named the station near Jackson Avenue "Syosset," and, from the day the line opened in July of 1854, the *New York Times* and the *Long Islander* newspaper began referring to our hamlet as the same. One year later, when the US Postal Service established a post office in Philetus Ketcham's general store on Jackson Avenue and named it "Syosset," all debate as to the "official" name of the community was put to rest. Henceforth, we were *Syosset*.

The Conclusion

Although Syosset does have some very impressive pine trees, sadly, it is *not* "The Place In The Pines" described by the Native American word, *Suwasset* -- which, in fact, was *never* associated by Native Americans with the place we now call *Syosset*. Even harder to accept is that the word "Syosset" has no Native American roots at all and, in actuality, was not a real word...in ANY language!

This sheds new light on the late 1990s debate about the use of the name "Braves" by many of Syosset's athletic teams. Ultimately, those who contended that the name and the accompanying mascot were a fitting tribute to the early inhabitants of our area won out and the name remained. However, given the strongly convincing argument that the word *Syosset* is more likely of Dutch derivation than anything else, perhaps it is time to reconsider our team names altogether. "Let's Go, *Syosset Schouts!*" anyone?

SPRING ARRANGEMENT.

On and after May 1, 1858.

Old Stage Line between Huntington and Syosset, via Woodbury.



Stages leave Huntington daily at 5.45 a.m. and 3 p.m. for Syosset, to connect with the cars for Brooklyn. Returning immediately on the arrival of the cars from Brooklyn.

JESSE CONKLIN & Co., Proprietors.