

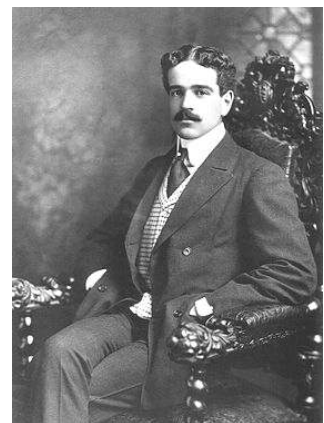
# 1908: The Great American Auto Race Comes To Syosset/Woodbury

by Tom Montalbano



The six Vanderbilt Cup International Automobile Races held on Long Island between 1904 and 1910 were not only the most spectacular sporting events of their day, but also the catalysts that brought some of New York City's most prominent residents to our area for the very first time. In fact, the 1908 race may signify a major turning point in the Syosset-Woodbury area's history - a point at which a more "sophisticated" class of people discovered our area and began to transform it from a sleepy farming community into a bustling playground for the rich and famous.

Conceived of and sponsored by 26-year-old William K. Vanderbilt II of the renowned and financially endowed shipping and railroad family, the Vanderbilt Cup Races were the first international automobile road competitions held in the United States, at a time when Syosset-Woodbury farmers still considered the automobile far inferior to their horse-drawn wagons. The wealthy Manhattan elite who could afford this new luxury instantly embraced the "horseless carriage," and many became automobile fanatics.



Initially run over public dirt and gravel roads from Queens to Suffolk County, the Vanderbilt Cup Races quickly deteriorated into a safety hazard as throngs of spectators, unaware of the damage a vehicle traveling at such high speed could inflict, lined the non-barricaded roads to cheer the drivers and capture photographs. Finally, after a vehicle lost control and killed a spectator at the 1906 race, Vanderbilt and a committee of some of his wealthiest friends convened and decided to build their own private roadway for the next event.

By 1908, Vanderbilt's team had completed nine miles of the \$2 million *Long Island Motor Parkway* and decided to schedule the next Vanderbilt Cup Race for Saturday, October 24<sup>th</sup>.

Despite objections from residents and politicians, the 1908 route also incorporated 14.46 miles of public roads, including portions of Woodbury Road and Jericho Turnpike that pass through Woodbury and Syosset. Prior to this event, the nearest the race had come to our area was a sharp turn at the intersection of Jericho Turnpike and Routes 106/107 in Jericho. The 1908 course, after reaching the north end of Manetto Hill Road, turned right onto Woodbury Road and continued all the way to Jericho Turnpike, making a sharp left turn just after the Woodbury School.

The following 1908 photographs depict the section of the race known among Vanderbilt Cup historians as “The Woodbury Turn.”



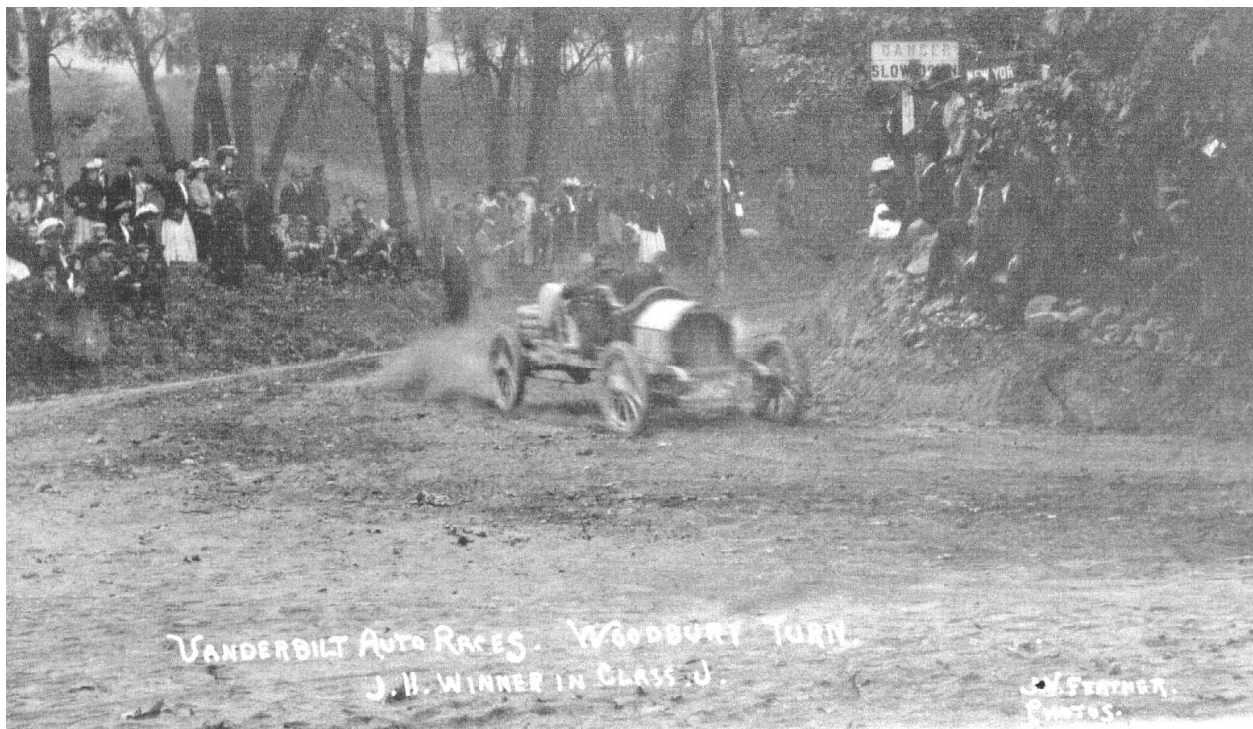
*Located at the intersection of Woodbury Road and Jericho Turnpike, the Woodbury Turn was a prime viewing location because of two large hills – one at the southeast corner of Woodbury Road and another adjacent to the Woodbury Methodist Church – which provided ideal vantage points for photographers. Above, spectators, dressed in their dapper weekend coats and top hats, gather on the hill now occupied by the brick Woodbury School to watch drivers whiz around the sharp turn onto Jericho Turnpike. In the distance, race enthusiasts pack the hill in front of the original Woodbury Methodist Church, which, as seen below, served as a hot coffee and sandwich stand.*



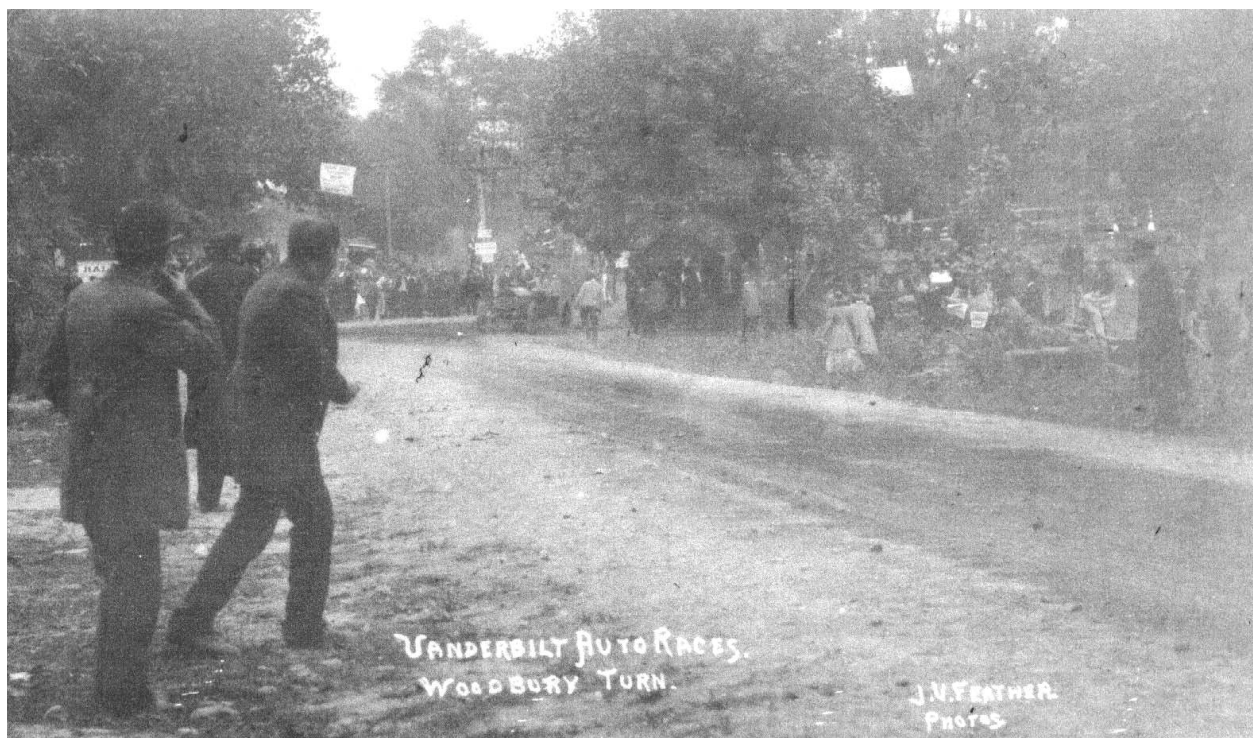
*Many attendees drove their own automobiles from Brooklyn and Manhattan to Long Island for the race; however, scores of others flooded the Syosset and Cold Spring Harbor LIRR stations during the days leading up to the event, having taken a special “excursion train” designated by the railroad company. This generated a boon for the local hotels, restaurants, and stage coach services, and gave attendees a close first look at the unspoiled Syosset/Woodbury region, which eventually became the site of many of their summer estates.*



*This shot, taken from the church steeple, shows the late 1800's Woodbury School atop the hill on Woodbury Road (upper right corner, further back from where the brick building now stands) and what appears to be the original one-room Woodbury School where the poet, Walt Whitman, taught in 1840 (white structure to the left, between the two trees). Note the small tent in the field near the center of the photo. This was likely set up by a family that intended to stay the entire day!*

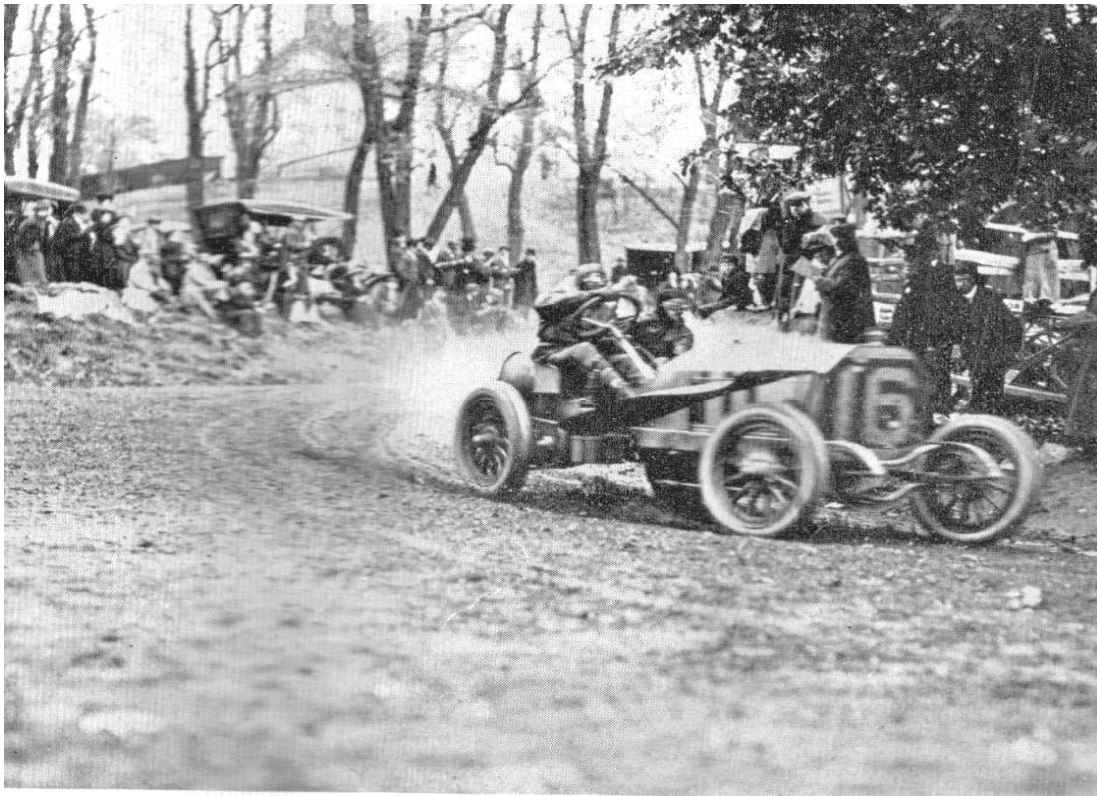


*A Vanderbilt Cup Racer kicks up dirt at the corner of Woodbury Road and Jericho Turnpike while daintily-clad women and children watch from the hill adjacent to the Woodbury School. Note the “Danger: Slow Down” sign on the southeast corner.*



*Taken at street level on Jericho Turnpike, this photo faces east, toward the corner of Woodbury Road. Perhaps in reaction to the tragedies that had occurred at the 1906 event, the spectators in this photo appear to be exercising caution as they step out into the road. Vehicles competing at the 1908 event reached speeds in excess of 65mph. While no injuries occurred during the actual race, a driver who failed to see a mob gathering around the winning car at the finish line could not stop his vehicle quickly enough to avoid striking and injuring an 18-year-old boy.*





*This shot, captured near the corner of Woodbury Road and Jericho Turnpike, shows American Locomobile #16, the eventual winner of the race, rounding the sharp turn. The old Woodbury School, set further back up the hill than the more recent brick school, can be seen in the background.*

After passing the Woodbury Turn, the 1908 Vanderbilt Cup right-of-way continued west on Jericho Turnpike, passing Jackson Avenue and the LIRR crossing near today's Underhill Boulevard before exiting the Turnpike at what is now Ellison Avenue in Westbury. The LIRR crossing on Jericho Turnpike in Syosset, still at street level in those days, was the only interruption of its type along the course. However, as seen in the 1908 photo below (facing east on Jericho Turnpike, toward the present-day overpass), activity at this locale was minimal.



Aside from its influence on American automobile technology, the Vanderbilt Cup Race also introduced the country's first parkway built exclusively for automobiles, an addition to the Long Island landscape that brought even more city dwellers to our region as vacationers and as permanent residents. Among the individuals in the photos on the previous pages are likely members of some of the most recognizable families in 19<sup>th</sup> Century American history. Within five years, many had purchased large parcels of farmland in the community and had built extravagant summer or year-round estates that significantly altered the local culture and economy.

Although many Syosset-Woodbury farmers remained steadfast in their belief that the automobile would never supplant the horse and wagon in our community, this, too, was soon to change.

*Special thanks to Howard Kroplick, Town of North Hempstead Historian, for photographs and historical assistance. For detailed information about the Vanderbilt Cup Races, visit [VanderbiltCupRaces.com](http://VanderbiltCupRaces.com) .*