

## Footnote To History

# Potter's Field: A Place For The Forgotten Poor

By John Gaccione

John Doe is buried there. So is John Doe, John Doe and John Doe. And while the list is not endless — expiring at 46 — there is still room for more . . .

But it has grown stale over the years, this customary burial place for paupers and unknowns established 88 years ago, having received its last member in 1967, and that a 25-minute-old stillborn baby.

Not many people in Smithtown know of this place. "You mean we really have a potter's field?" is the incredulous response.

Potter's Field here is a long plot of land (313 by 138 feet) that lies on the south side of Darling Avenue, between Route 111 and Maple Avenue. Nestled beneath large pine trees, the field is unadorned and unattended. Like a scraggly row of teeth, 42 markers dot the landscape on the westernmost end of the parcel. Most of the small, white marble stones are chipped and worn with age.

Not all who are buried here are unknowns, however, contrary to the simple markers' indications. While numbers and not names are chiseled in the stones — no doubt to simplify bookkeeping and accommodate a tight budget — to the average person coming upon the site, the numbers suggest the public's common calling of a John Doe. Or, as tradition observes, the place for unknowns, paupers and criminals, although Town records do not indicate the presence of felons.

But by a felon of sorts, it seems, is how a potter's field came about, with Judas Iscariot having staked out immortality by first betraying his friend for 30 pieces of silver and then doing himself in in such a place, according to the Bible.

And while only 15 persons interred here are genuine John Does, usually having washed up on a local beach, decomposed and beyond identification, very little is known about those who have names.

Of course, for the handful of stillborn babies, there is little to be recorded. But the number-one marker, according to town records, belongs to William Crowell, 35, who died on June 12, 1891. Nothing is known about him. The ledger page reads only "laborer" and that he died from a "pulmonary" disorder. He apparently had no money; and if he had relatives, they didn't have money either.

No doubt Mr. Crowell was typical of the clientele for whom the plot was obtained when the Town Board, led by Supervisor Eugene J. Platt, appropriated \$100 in 1890 to buy the land from Egbert and Elizabeth Brush "as a burial place for the poor of Smithtown . . ." The responsibility for the parcel originally lay in the Town Board's hands until 1894, when it was delegated to the Town Clerk.

Records of the early years, which are sparse, indicate a segregated cemetery, both by color and currency. Whites and "coloreds" occupy two sections, which are further subdivided into \$2 graves and "free."

Except, perhaps, to adhere to the prevailing prejudices of the times, nobody seems to know the rationale for the divisions; and there is no clear dividing line evident on the field today.

"I can't account for it," said Town Clerk Victor Liss, who was elected to office in 1946. "I guess it was their procedure then . . . by color and whether you could afford to pay." For the past 32 years, Mr. Liss has not abided by any such designation.

Other than the stillborn baby 11 years ago, the field lies virtually fallow, Mr. Liss said, since unclaimed bodies now go the way of science to unearth medical mysteries. "Under the public health law today," the Town Clerk explained, "if a body is not claimed within five days, it can be given by the funeral home to a medical school. Only if it's badly decomposed will it be buried."

Although there is no recorded anecdotal history about Potter's Field here, there is some belief that victims of the 1916 polio epidemic are buried there. Mr. Liss said that at the time, a temporary Polio Hospital was built to house patients just west of the field.

The Town's Parks Department maintains the property, which has a rusted ribbon fence in front and is bounded on three sides by houses. There is nothing to call attention to it. If the site is not totally neglected (the grass is mowed periodically), neither is it noted nor nurtured except for the cursory cuttings. It is simply a wide expanse, without markings or flowers.

But for the occasional passing of youngsters who cut a narrow path through the site to get from Darling Avenue to Columbus Avenue (there is a worn path in front of the stones), it appears unvisited.

Sm News 8/10/78



**FIELD OF THE FORGOTTEN:** Potter's Field in Smithtown lies just off of Darling Avenue. There are about 42 people buried there.

Dave Friedman photo

During his tenure, Mr. Liss can remember two incidents involving Potter's Field. In 1948, a woman from California came to Smithtown to visit the grave of her brother who had died four years earlier. "Since I maintain all the death records," Mr. Liss recalled, "I tried to find out where he was buried." After checking, he discovered that the brother lay in Potter's Field, which rankled the woman, since she had forwarded money to her nephew to "insure a decent burial." Apparently, he absconded with the funds. The body was disinterred and shipped to California.

But 10 years later, the Town Clerk got another grave under the most unusual and unwelcomed circumstances to replace the one that got away. "It just popped up one day out on the field," Mr. Liss said, "and I had no record of it." Fearing the possibility of some shady doings, Mr. Liss contacted the District Attorney who dispatched a team to investigate.

"They didn't have to dig very far until we realized it was a shallow grave and a joke," Mr. Liss concluded. He attributed the grave's appearance to kids who probably stumbled upon the extra markers that were once stored there and decided to 'have a little fun.'



**UNLUCKY NUMBER:** True to the superstition, Number 13 in Potter's Field belongs to Robert Truss who was murdered (gunshot wound in the chest) on April 8, 1909. He was a mason who lived in St. James. His age was estimated at 50. Story, page 2.

Dave Friedman photo

Ormelintown Burial Board

TOWN CLERKS OFFICE

Plot IV pages  
Graves \$2<sup>00</sup>

Plot III pages 76  
Free for Colored

Plot II pages  
Graves \$2<sup>00</sup>

Plot I pages  
Free for Whites

313 feet

M. CHAMBERS, INVENTORY, POTTERS FIELD FOLDER # 3

CHEMISTERS. INVENTORY. POTT. RS FIELD FOLDER 4

313 feet

Plot II 200  
Graves #200

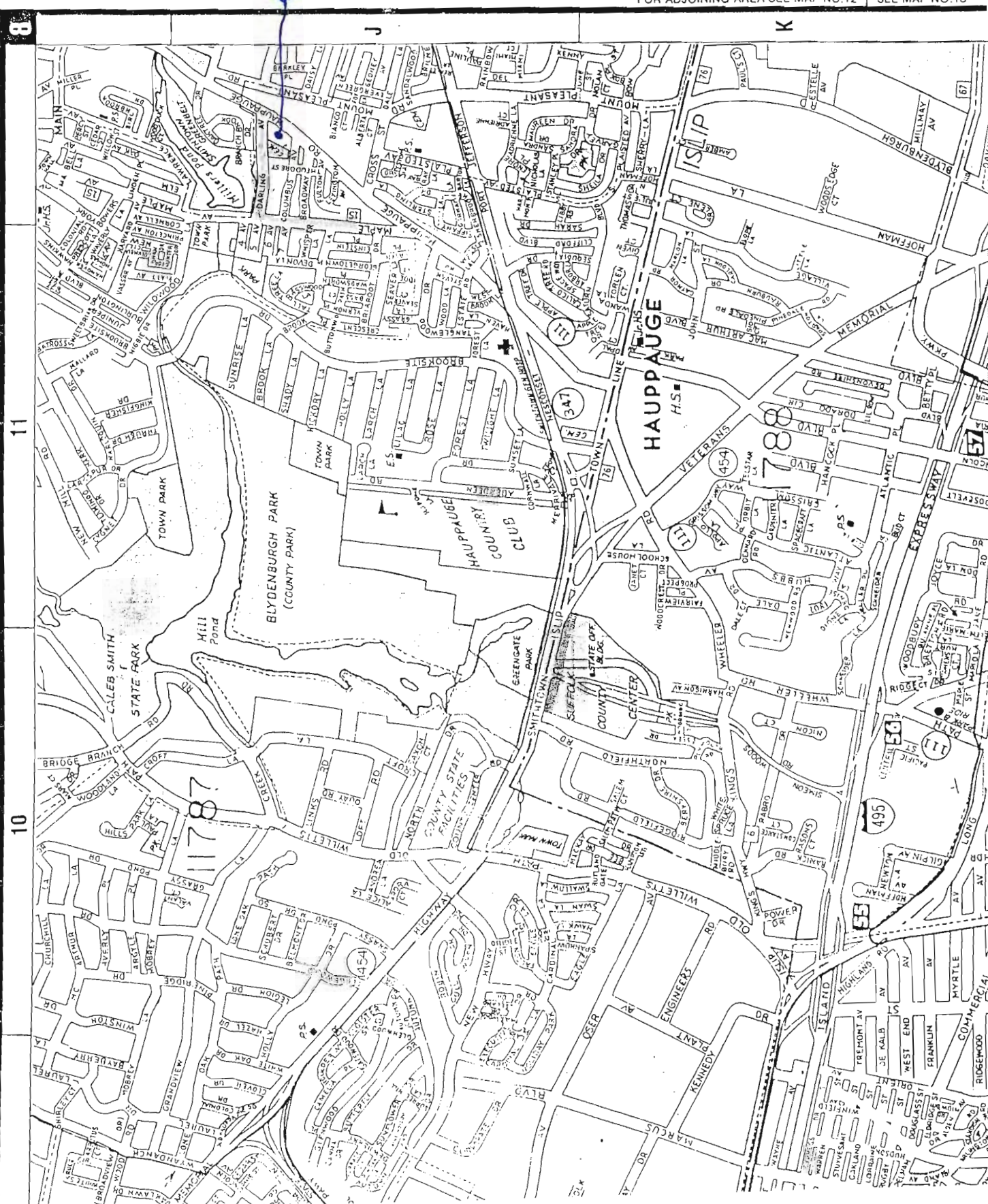
Plot I 200  
Tree for Whites

1000

3  
Houston 1988

FOR ADJOINING AREA SEE MAP NO. 12 | SEE MAP NO. 13

FOR ADJOINING AREA SEE MAP NO. 7



8

11

10

J

K

HAUPPAUGE H.S.

HAUPPAUGE COUNTRY CLUB

BLYDENBURGH PARK (COUNTY PARK)

Mill Pond

CALEY SMITH STATE PARK

VETERANS

COUNTY STATE OFF. BLDG. CENTER

WILLETTS

ENGINEERS

KENNEDY

MARCUS

BLVD

DR

AV

ST

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# Smithtown Potter's Field

50 Darling Ave. Smithtown, New York

Interment list transcribed by Susan Howell Denny 2016

Last Name	First Name	Bur. Date	Death Date	age	color	notations	row#	grave #
<b>Bates</b>	George Paul	6/8/1945	6/6/1945	67	w		2	39
<b>Bono</b>	Baby		1/13/1911	5 days	w		1	14
<b>Branchi</b>	Amelia		3/22/1919	30	w		1	27
<b>Burns or Green</b>	Paddy		2/28/1915	45	w		1	19
<b>Buthwish</b>	Vincent		7/28/1931		w	auto accident		80
<b>Conlin</b>	James		2/4/1915	abt 45	w		1	18
<b>Crowell</b>	William		6/12/1891	35	w		1	1
<b>DeCarlo</b>	Dominick		7/21/1882	34	w		1	2
<b>Dickman</b>	Mary	2/20/1923	2/9/1923	40	w	from 308 W.42nd St, NYC- committed suicide at Kings Park		30
<b>Doe</b>	Joseph		1/7/1899	35	w		1	8
<b>Dunn</b>	Jeremiah		9/23/1937	51	w			79
<b>Fisher</b>	Mary		7/29/1882	50	w	Wife of John Fisher	1	3
<b>Fisher</b>	John		5/4/1893	50	w	Husband of Mary Fisher	1	4
<b>Funk</b>	Baby		12/26/1911	1 day	w		1	15
<b>Funk</b>	Mary F.		12/31/1915	41	w	DISINTERRED - moved to Smithtown Cemetery 4/29/1923	1	24
<b>Gaicona</b>	Baby		12/5/1917		w	stillborn	1	23
<b>Grant</b>	Gordon	2/25/1941	2/16/1941	49	w	found LI -drowned	2	27
<b>Kerstan</b>	Augustina	2/26/1951	2/22/1951	55y6mo8d	w		2	42
<b>Kline</b>	George G.		1/7/1894	30	w		1	6
<b>Lawson</b>	Thomas	4/10/1942	Apr-42		w		2	29

<b>Mapes</b>	Levi		12/29/1916	48	w		1	22
<b>McGrey</b>	Evelyn	7/11/1937	7/9/1937	41	w	died in Huntington	1	34
<b>Metroff</b>	Henry	12/8/1948	12/6/1948	68	w		2	41
<b>Miller</b>	Conrad		11/5/1894	23	w		1	7
<b>Moscher</b>	Frank		7/14/1922	46	w	from Kings Park	1	29
<b>Nasti</b>	Louis	3/21/1937	3/15/1937		w	from Nesconset	1	33
<b>Olsen</b>	Andrew	10/16/1943	10/14/1943	83	w	from St. James	2	38
<b>Parashosyn</b>	Anthony	7/17/1942	7/14/1942	59	w	from Kings Park	2	36
<b>Pina</b>	Baby		8/27/1915		w	stillborn	1	20
<b>Pirraglia</b>	Baby	3/28/1967	2/21/1967		w	boy - registered #108	2	45
<b>Pirraglia</b>	Baby	3/28/1967	2/22/1967		w	girl - registered #109	2	46
<b>Potchtar</b>	Baby		3/24/1918		w		1	26
<b>Reehl</b>	William	11/2/1939	10/30/1939	74	w	from St. James	1	30
<b>Rosa</b>	John		4/15/1926					
<b>Schraeder</b>	Henry		4/8/1912	52	w		1	16
<b>Senter</b>	Baby	3/19/1940	3/15/1940		w	baby of Margaret Senter	2	26
<b>Smith</b>	Jerry	1/28/1958	1/25/1958	78	w		2	43
<b>Stahl</b>	Nicholas	6/18/1934	6/14/1934			from Smithtown	1	31
<b>Susha</b>	John	12/14/1945	12/12/1945	59	w		2	40
<b>Sweezey</b>	Henry		1/29/1908	3 mo	w		1	12
<b>Tenney</b>	Mary T.		3/7/1930	70	w	from Kings Park	1	24
<b>Tosh</b>	Joseph	12/3/1936	11/30/1936		w	from Commack	1	32
<b>Truss</b>	Robert		4/8/1909	50	w	murdered	1	13
<b>Tully</b>	Mary		7/6/1942	78	w	from St. James	2	35
<b>Unknown</b>			9/3/1893	uk	w	found on Long Island Sound shore-drowned	1	5
<b>Unknown</b>	Baby		5/21/1900	infant	w	found on Blvd at Kings Park	1	9



<b>Unknown</b>	Baby		11/10/1904	infant	w	found St. James Harbor	1	11
<b>Unknown</b>			9/21/1913	abt 40	w	drowned- male	1	17
<b>Unknown</b>			1/2/1918	abt 55	w	killed by railroad	1	25
<b>Unknown</b>			9/20/1920		w	drowned man found LI Sound shore between John Shiels and P. Daytons.	1	28
<b>Unknown</b>	Baby	6/11/1938	6/7/1938	less than 1 hr	w		1	36
<b>Unknown</b>					w	found on LI Sound shore	1	10
<b>Veiteh</b>	Harry	7/30/1942	7/28/1942	62	w	DISINTERRED - moved to Calvary Cem Mausoleum, Los Angeles	2	37
<b>Vigilanti</b>	Baby		1/24/1916		w	stillborn	1	21
<b>Wetzel</b>	Julius	6/2/1941	5/31/1941		w		2	28
<b>Witkos</b>	Baby	6/8/1962	6/5/1962	25 min	w		2	44
<b>Black Section</b>								
<b>Bailey</b>	Titus		6/7/1891	83	b			53
<b>Collins</b>	Elizabeth		10/2/1890	50	b			51
<b>Collins</b>	Rosa		10/11/1890	8	b			52
<b>Collins</b>			7/27/2896	3mo	b			60
<b>Cuffee</b>	Edna Augusta		7/6/1905	33	b	Wife of Lester Cuffee		89
<b>Cuffee</b>	Ruth Ann		2/9/1892	2	b			62
<b>Cuffee</b>	Paul		12/7/1895	2	b			63
<b>Cuffee</b>	Elsworth		11/2/1897	4mo3d	b			64
<b>Floyd</b>	Clara		12/25/1903	10mo	b			68
<b>Foulke</b>	Gladys		2/28/1907	2	b			88
<b>Foulke</b>	Mane/Maree		8/1/1912	4 mo	b			73
<b>Franklin</b>	William		12/12/1890	1	b			55
<b>Hamer/poss Haymer</b>	Henry Wilmot		2/15/1905	11	b			70

<b>Haymer</b>			4/29/1907		b		71
<b>Haymer</b>	Manard		8/26/1903	3mo	b		67
<b>Helms</b>	Minnie		8/28/1891	15y1mo	b		56
<b>Helms</b>	Abbie		3/18/1901	42	b		65
<b>Helms</b>	William		3/16/1901	48	b	known as Will Dobbs	66
<b>Homan</b>	Lucas		11/19/1921	32	b	colored	
<b>Jackson</b>	Baby		8/18/1897	4 days	b	Infant of Ed and Clara Jackson	59
<b>Lewis</b>	David		7/27/1893	1y1mo10d	b		58
<b>Mitchel</b>	Calvin		3/25/1904	74	b		69
<b>Pollard</b>	George		1/11/1891	65	b		54
<b>Ruggles</b>	Alma L.		11/2/1914	2 mo	b		76
<b>Smith</b>	Jack B.		7/10/1896	65	b		61
<b>Stevens</b>	Ruth		6/15/1913	78	b		75
<b>Treadwell</b>	Frank		8/12/1910	75	b		72
<b>Ward</b>	Baby		May 1892	infant	b	Infant of Wm Ward	57
<b>Williams</b>	Howard		2/17/1913	1	b		74