

# Historical shoes to fill

LI municipalities face requirement to hire historians

**ONLY IN NEWSDAY**

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More than a century ago, Gov. Al Smith signed a law requiring every city, town and village in New York to appoint a public historian.

New York was the first state to pass such a law, and the intent was noble. Each historian “shall . . . add to the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the community’s history,” the law mandated.

But on Long Island and across much of the state, the requirement appears to carry the approximate force of New York City’s now repealed prohibition on jaywalking, which is to say, slight.

## Little-known law

There are no penalties for scofflaw municipalities. Many officials surveyed said they did not know they had been in violation.

“The last one that was appointed, from our records, was back in the ‘80s somewhere,” North Hills Mayor Marvin Natiss said.

“Now that I know state law requires it,” Natiss added, “I’m going to discuss it at the next board meeting, and we’re going to appoint a village historian.”

In Cedarhurst, Village Administrator Jacob Plaut said the village planned to fill the position soon after “I became aware we actually have a vacancy.” The clerk in Village of the Branch said Mayor Mark Delaney was “actively interviewing to fill our open role.”

Upper Brookville Mayor Elliot Conway said he expected to appoint a historian this summer. The village’s last historian, Isabel Leib, died in 2019 at age 92, according to online obituaries. Conway said he hoped to update a 128-page monograph on the village’s first half-century which covers the years through 1982 and is posted on the village website. But given the time and ef-



Gov. Al Smith, cutting cake, signed a law requiring all New York State municipalities have a historian.

fort that would entail, “we’d have to pay somebody.” The village historian, like the trustees, work without salary.

In Brightwaters, Mayor John Valdini, president of the Suffolk County Village Officials Association, said the village has a historian but went through “a couple years” without one. “I didn’t realize there was an actual law,” Valdini said. The village, which he said once kept records “in closets, behind file cabinets,” now has a dedicated “history area” in Village Hall for storage and study.

## Filling vacancies

For 2023, the website for the Association of Public Historians of New York State, the non-profit representing the state’s more than 1,600 officially appointed historians, listed 20 vacancies for 70 Nassau positions and six vacancies for 20 positions in Suffolk. The vacancies were all for villages except Glen Cove and Shelter Island.

At least two vacancies, in Glen Cove and Stewart Manor, have since been filled, according to officials for those municipalities. Shelter Island officials did not respond to a request for comment.

One new vacancy may have opened with the 2024 death of Nassau County Historian Edward Smits. (The law says that a county “may” appoint a historian.) A spokesman for Nassau



Babylon Historian Mary Cascone shows a document from the 1970s.

## WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- A law requiring every city, town and village in New York to appoint a public historian has been on the books in New York State for more than a century.
- The law includes no penalties for scofflaws and some officials from Long Island municipalities said they weren’t aware that having a historian was written into law.
- Filling vacant historian posts can be a challenge but several villages and towns on Long Island are actively searching.

County Executive Bruce Blake-man did not respond to a request for comment.

Long Island did not appear to be significantly worse off than the rest of downstate, with at least two vacancies in New York City, seven in Westchester County and eight in Rockland.

“You don’t have a line of people waiting for these jobs, normally,” said Julie Madlin, the association’s president and historian for the upstate City of Og-

densburg. The salary is often “not great,” she said, and several Long Island officials interviewed for this story said there was no salary at all.

Many of the jobs statewide are filled by retired history teachers, though “we also have people, especially in smaller municipalities, who have just really great interest in history and enjoy doing it,” Madlin said.

Many vacancies are created when historians age out of the

job, she said. “We’re an older bunch. . . . You’re looking at people in their 60s, 70s. We have 80-year-olds.” In some cases, she said, “they have a lot of knowledge in their brains, but they haven’t written it down. . . . If there isn’t someone to replace them when they leave, that knowledge is lost.”

## Embracing history

In the early 20th century, the statutory duties of the public historian were simply to “collect and preserve material relating to the history of the political subdivision for which he or she is appointed” and file the material in “fireproof safes or vaults.”

In 1988, according to a historians’ association report, amendments to the “historian’s law” expanded the historian’s role to encourage collection of nongovernmental records by libraries and historical societies and research community history.

Some communities have embraced the role of public historian. Babylon Town employs a professional historian, Mary Cascone, whose official blog includes deeply researched articles about town luminaries like Rodney Dangerfield and Robert Moses. One blog post is simply a list, 67 names long, of Babylon men killed in Vietnam, accompanied by photographs with basic biographical and grave information.

Cascone’s daily work has included answering questions from other officials about property records created when the town’s streets had different names, or on the veracity of birth certificates issued by a hospital — Lakeside, in Copiague — that closed so long ago that a colleague from the clerk’s office wasn’t sure the facility had really existed.

Cascone has debunked a rumor that a resident’s house was a former Underground Railroad stop, answered residents’ questions about town landmarks like the Woolworth at Great South Bay Shopping Center and steered amateur genealogists in the right direction, though doing that research is not part of a public historian’s job description.

“I think we’re a tremendous resource,” Cascone said.

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