

THE JEWEL OF LONG ISLAND

Long Island is famous for the Hamptons with celebrities, sprawling mansions, Shinnecock and Montauk, the wineries on the North and South Forks, the Atlantic Ocean coast line beaches for surfing and boating, fresh and saltwater fishing and crabbing on both shores along with the other nature gems for summer and winter activities. But the jewel of Long Island can be found sitting on 1,477-acres - *Bethpage State Park*.

The park contains a cluster of activities including the Polo fields, The Bikeway, mountain biking trails, picnic area, championship golf courses and amazing hiking trails along with a deep and interesting history.

The history begins in the 17th century. In 1687, Puritan Thomas Powell, [purchased](#) 15 miles of land from local Indian tribes referred to as *The Bethpage Purchase*. He named the area Bethpage because it was located between two other places on Long Island, Jericho and Jerusalem (later renamed Wantagh) and in reverence to the Biblical town of Bethpage which was located between Jericho and Jerusalem in Israel. Later, Powell's 14 children split up his purchase and it evolved into several farming communities.

In 1912, [Benjamin Franklin Yoakum](#), a wealthy railroad executive, acquired 1,368 acres in what is now known as Old Bethpage. He had the Green Course built which opened in 1923. In 1931, three years after Yoakum died, *The Long Island State Park Commission* purchased an option on the property. Then in 1933 with unemployment rampant, legislation put forth by then Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, formed the public benefit corporation called the *Bethpage Park Authority*. The Authority was given power to issue bonds for the acquisition and operation of Bethpage State Park which led to the development and construction of three new golf courses, an updated more modern golf clubhouse, the polo fields, hiking trails, picnic area and the recreational fields. By 1934 the purchase was official and Bethpage Park opened to the public.

The park is actually located in the hamlet of Old Bethpage. At the time of the official opening, there was no post office in Old Bethpage so the park used the Farmingdale post office address, which is the present address, because the golf clubhouse was within the Farmingdale Postal District. Then, in 1936, the adjacent hamlet of Central Park changed its name to Bethpage. But, the original hamlet of Bethpage resisted merging with the new Bethpage. But the resisting paid off and they received approval from the Post Master General to change its name to *Old Bethpage*,

As you enter the park off of Quaker Meeting House Road, the mile- long road that takes you into the parking field offers you a taste of some of the amenities the park offers. On your right, is the 13th hole of the Yellow course. The five [golf courses](#) at Bethpage, or as they are known, "The People's Country Club," contain the Black course, built in 1936, which gained fame for hosting the first PGA event on a public course, the 2002 and 2009 US Open. The courses draw people from around the country with the Green being the first one built back in 1935. It is said that when the Marx Brothers filmed in NY, they would have to lock them in a room so they didn't skip out and play the Green.

On your left, bikers and walkers stream down the northern end of the [Bethpage Bikeway](#). The paved asphalt path is 14.9 miles, with 6.8 miles going through the park, and begins at Merrick Road in Massapequa and continues north along Bethpage Parkway and into the park before continuing north. There is the blue trail which is designated for use as a mountain biking trail, which starts in the park and goes north to *Stillwell Woods*. But the paved Bikeway, is separated by three parks: *Massapequa Preserve*, *Bethpage* and finally ending in *Trailview Park*. Now, the path begins at Merrick Rd. and Ocean Ave and heads north through Massapequa Preserve, Farmingdale, along Bethpage Parkway and into Bethpage Park. But there is another 3.1 miles going south to *Cedar Creek Park* not officially considered the Bikeway. From Cedar Creek, a paved path runs for 4 miles along Wantagh Parkway and into *Jones Beach*. From this point is the project of the NYSDOT with funding from New York State called the *Ocean Parkway Coastal Greenway* which runs for 3.6 miles from Jones Beach to Tobay Beach. Construction of the final phase will be between Tobay Beach and Captree State Park in Suffolk County and is scheduled for 2021.

Back to the journey into the park. As you reach the entrance to the lot, to the right is the field entrance to the [Bethpage Polo Fields](#) which were built in 1934. The matches are played from June until September. Bethpage hosted the 1994 finals of the US Open Polo Championship. Continuing straight, you enter the parking lot for the park and witness an outstanding outdoor setting with an array of recreation and leisure activities including basketball courts and open field areas located behind and on the east side of the picnic area.

The picnic area is a large area with picnic tables and barbecues scattered about with a fantastic setting enclosed by the wide tree canopies of the woods. Inside the area are two Pavilions, *The Eagle* and *The Bluebird*, which can each seat approximately 250 people and are available to rent during the summer. Now comes the time when you either planned a hike or you need to walk off the barbecue and desserts. As you walk back further away from the picnic area and follow the circumference of the parking area going east to west, you notice the start of the trails, or trailheads. Let the adventure begin.

The trailhead and the trails themselves are marked by *blazes*. Blazes are the square shaped marks on trees along the trail that allow you to follow the path of that trail loop. All of the trails at Bethpage have a different color blaze and each trail has a different mileage. All of the trail loops, meaning they all come back to the starting point, stay within the park area so it is hard to get lost. The blue mountain bike trail and the white, which is *The Long Island Greenbelt*, are the only trails that lead out of the vicinity of the park.

The Long Island Greenbelt trail runs north to south for 34 miles with southern end starting in Massapequa heading north and ending at *Sunken Meadow Park*. The trail marker along the entire trail is white, but only about 3 miles go through Bethpage before it continues into *Trailview Park*. There is also the blue trail for mountain biking, which is the longest trail in the park beside the Greenbelt which runs north into *Stillwell Woods*. The rest of the trails in the park are short loops, some only 2 miles. If you are looking for a more challenging hike, you can put together a few loops. But one suggestion when going from one trail color to another, is to

have a compass since it is easy to get turned around. If you have a compass, all you need to know is that the parking lot is due south.

Bethpage Park provides signage for all areas to make your stay more enjoyable. One sign at the beginning of the red trail as you enter the park, shows the symbols for the beginning and ending of a trail. These symbols are actually the blazes you use to follow the trail. The only difference is an added square that directs you to go left or right. Also, under the symbols is a [QR code](#) which is a 2D barcode. If you have an app or use an Iphone, you take a picture of the code which then accesses the stored information encoded in the barcode, in this case a [map](#) of all the trails.

In the winter, Bethpage Park still has the picnic area open, so if you brave the cold you can still take advantage of the tables. The park also offers sledding, snow- shoeing and cross-country skiing on selected golf courses (the cross-country trails are not groomed the way they are in upstate parks) but the fun still exists. Also, you do have to bring your own equipment, rentals are not available. The park is a great setting just to walk around, especially on a sunny, cold day. To maximize the walk, you should purchase [foot traction](#) which slip over a pair of sneakers or hiking boots. My preference is Micro Spikes since they have sets of stainless steel spikes attached to a heavy rubber band that slip over you shoes and dig into ice which enables you to walk across a frozen pond or shallow snow as if you are walking on wooded trail. Of course, always use caution and make sure the water is solid enough to walk across.

No matter what you are looking to do: hiking, biking, basketball, baseball, setting up volleyball or out to have a small barbecue or outdoor event in one of the pavilions, Bethpage Park offers an array of areas that can put you in touch with nature. The park offers such a wide area of land, that you can find a secluded area and write, read or just enjoy the gems of nature.