



Staten Island's conservative role in a liberal N.Y.

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on July 08, 2012 at 8:00 AM

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Staten Islanders often refer to their home as "the forgotten borough."



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Also an integral part of the Island's history is the closing of the former Fresh Kills landfill. The last barge of trash arrived on March 22, 2001, and the site is to now become a park.

But the new book, "Staten Island: Conservative Bastion In a Liberal City," makes clear that the Island has played a crucial role in city and national politics.

"Staten Island is very much in tune with the rest of the country," said co-author Richard M. Flanagan, a professor of political science at the College of Staten Island (CSI). "Much more so than Manhattan is."

The book, co-written with the late Daniel C. Kramer, a fellow CSI professor and widely respected expert on Island politics, traces the big developments that have shaped Island history in recent decades: The opening of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge; the battle over the South Richmond Plan; the secession movement; the closing of the Fresh Kills landfill; how the Island helped elect Republicans Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg mayor, and the NASCAR controversy.

And there are also takes on the big political sagas, including Guy Molinari's move from Congress to Borough Hall, and the handing off of his House seat to daughter Susan and then to Vito Fossella; the GOP schism over Assemblyman Robert Straniere and the allegations that he didn't live on the Island; party leadership battles on both sides of the aisle, including the turmoil that followed the death of Assemblyman and Democratic chairman John Lavelle, and the election of James Molinaro as the first Conservative Party borough president in city history.

There are also recountings of some of the biggest scandals to hit the Island, including the Abscam episode that engulfed Democratic Rep. John Murphy, and the love-child imbroglio that toppled Fossella.

"There have been a lot of personal scandals here," said Flanagan. "A lot of blushing."

For Flanagan, two figures stand out above the rest in recent Island history: Molinari and GOP state Sen. John

Marchi.

"In the future," he said, "people will talk about two figures: Molinari and Marchi."

The two he said, contributed to "urban conservatism in a big way."

Marchi and Molinari, twin titans of the last 50 years of Island history, represent two sides of the same conservative coin, according to Flanagan. Marchi, the more august and sedate; Molinari the populist "flamethrower."

"The way conservatives like Marchi reacted to urban liberals in the 1970s hit home on Staten Island," Flanagan said.

Molinari, meanwhile, put the Island on the national map by helping Republicans Giuliani and Bloomberg get elected mayor, showing that the borough didn't need to have large numbers of voters in order to flex its muscle.

The book ends with the 2010 midterm elections, when Democrat Michael McMahon became the first Democrat to hold the Island congressional seat in 30 years.

Tracing the sociological roots of Island conservatism, the book details how how New Yorkers fled the other four boroughs and came to the Island for its one- and two-family homes and other suburban amenities, particularly Brooklynites who arrived after the Verrazano opened in 1964.

Leaving behind the crime and overcrowding of more urban settings, many remained registered Democrats even as they more and more voted for Republicans.

"It's allowed me to bring together a lot of things that I've been thinking about," Flanagan said of the book.

Flanagan and Kramer relied on personal interviews and archival research in crafting the book, including tapping the Advance and its political reporters, as well as the sprawling state government archives at CSI and the defunct Staten Island Register weekly newspaper.

Flanagan stepped into the project after Kramer, author of numerous books and articles, fell ill.

"It's his vision," said Flanagan. "He started it. He was a mentor to me. Bringing his final project to fruition was a thrill."

Kramer died in 2010.

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