

A History of Centre Island

Malcolm MacKay
and
Charles G. Meyer, Jr.



A History of Centre Island

Summer, 1976

Malcolm MacKay
Charles G. Meyer, Jr.

This brief history of Centre Island is dedicated to
the memory of
EDA FLORENCE DOLLIVER RUSCH
1879 - 1976
a summer resident from 1904 until her death.

* * * * *

Privately Published

1976

Second Printing

1980

Copyright by Malcolm MacKay and Charles G. Meyer, Jr., 1976

On all those shores there are echoes of past
and future: of the flow of time, obliterating
yet containing all that has gone before.

Rachel Carson

Centre Island is a child of the glaciers. It was formed approximately 25,000 years ago when the last great glacier to cover New England stood still for several thousand years, its rate of southern movement equalling its rate of melting. Glacial till brought from the north was dropped to form what is known as the Harbor Hill moraine. It stretches from Fishers Island and the North Fork in the east, through Stony Brook, Oyster Bay and Roslyn to Lake Success, where it overrides the earlier Ronkonkoma moraine and pushes as far south as Staten Island.

As the ice melted and the climate warmed, Long Island was invaded by life in what the European explorers were to describe as an incredible variety of forms. In Eurasia, the glaciers pressed south to mountain ranges running east and west, extinguishing many species. In North America, the mountains extend north and south, and flora and fauna that had retreated south to avoid the ice were able to return.

As a result of the glacier's melting and retreat, the sea level began its gradual rise of 350 feet to its present level, and Long Island Sound went from stream to river to fresh water lake, and finally to estuary. The water level is still rising - as much as 1.25 centimeters per year at Willets Point during the 1960's. As the Centre Island Development Plan published in 1975 warns: "Such a rate, if maintained, could significantly affect erosion patterns even within one human life-span."

The first persons we know who lived on Centre Island were summer residents, the Matinecock Indians of the Algonquin language group. The seasonal round, moving from place to place along the coast in the warm weather, gathering shellfish and box turtles, fishing and hunting for deer, birds and other animals brought the Indians to camp along the southern shore of the Island. These Matinecocks, known for their large dugout canoes and peaceful natures, are classified in the Woodland Stage (roughly 1000 B.C.

to the time of European contact). There is evidence that Indians belonging to three other distinct classifications dating to 10500 B.C. inhabited Long Island, but no record remains of contact with Centre Island.

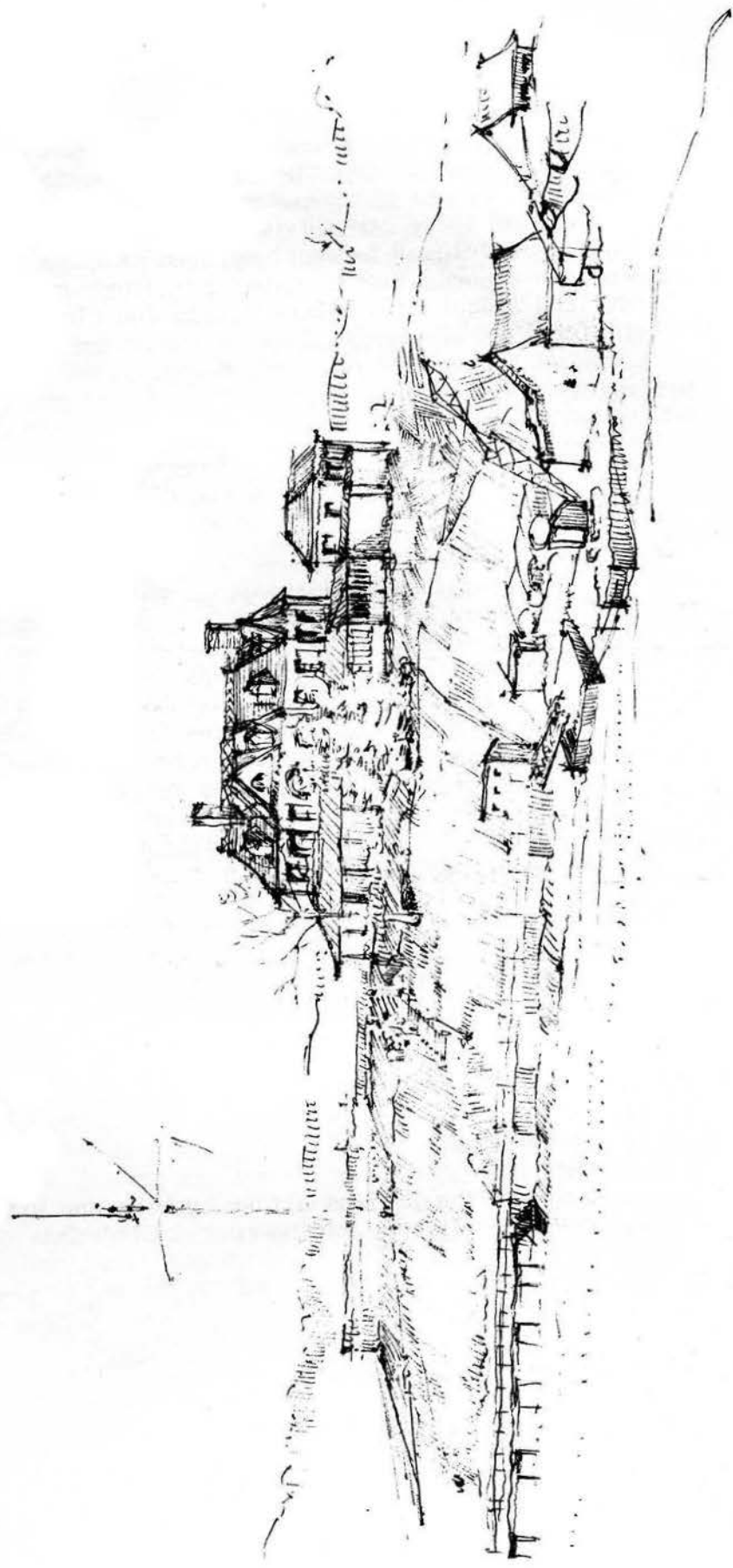
The Dutch explorer DeVries, who in 1639 became the first European to anchor in Oyster Bay harbor and gave it its name, described "oysters a foot long and broad in proportion." He pictured the land bordering the harbor as a Garden of Eden, fertile and swarming with game and fowl, but also wolves.

The composition of the beaches on Centre Island has changed very little in the last several thousand years. They consist of glacial till in the form of sand, gravel and rocks. In several places such as Brickyard Point and Eastover Beach they are underlaid by clay. The sloping intertidal zone is a ladder of life where species of organisms evolve. Some, such as the horseshoe crab, have remained fixed on one rung for the last 200 million years. Other animals inhabiting the intertidal zone include moon snails, sand dollars, periwinkles, dog whelks, mud snails, many kinds of worms, bivalves and joint-legged animals such as barnacles, crabs and also sand fleas. Barnacles are close relatives of crabs and among Centre Island's most numerous animal species. Louis Agassiz, the noted naturalist, described the barnacle as "little more than a small animal standing on its head inside a limestone shelter and pushing its food into its mouth with its feet."

Relatively unchanged from prehistoric time are the sand dunes with their desert environment, and the wetlands. With the temperature reaching 120 degrees Fahrenheit, moist skin animals avoid the dunes and mice, rabbits and toads are most active at night. The wetlands are the result of the large tidal range at Centre Island - 7.3 feet - and are among the world's most fertile areas because nutrients and droppings of mussels are trapped in the mud where fresh and salt water meet. The mussel leavings are eaten by algae and crabs, which in turn are eaten by larger animals. Destroy the wetlands, and birds, shellfish and fish will immediately dwindle. While the lower marsh and the wetland area at Brickyard Point are healthy, the upper marsh (across the road



Charles Smith house, built 1871, currently owned by the Burr family.



Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club, built in 1891-92.

from the Seawanhaka dinghy shed) is no longer in the tidal zone, as can be seen by the proliferation of phragmites or brown marsh grass. The upper marsh might be restored to a tidal wetland by enlarging the culvert connecting it to the lower marsh. Although the beaches, dunes and wetlands have remained relatively unchanged, the same cannot be said of the mainland. Lady slippers, columbine and lupines have given way to such imports as daisies, chicory, Scotch thistle, Queen Anne's lace and Japanese honeysuckle. The imported pheasant has prospered, while the native wolf and beaver have not.

Oyster Bay was permanently settled in 1653 by several families from Barnstable on Cape Cod. They entered the harbor on a small sloop, Desire, with two cannon in the bow. (The guns were necessary in case of attack by Pequot Indians from Connecticut in their 80-man canoes.) These settlers bought 20,000 acres from the Matinecocks, for "6 Indian coats, 6 kettles, 6 fathoms wampum, 6 hoes, 6 hatchets, 3 pairs stockings, 30 owl blades, 20 knives, 3 shirts, and peague (black wampum) to the amount of four pounds sterling." The deed of sale is still preserved in the town clerk's office. Wampum, originally an Indian currency, was in demand by the white settlers as well, and Oyster Bay was something of a wampum factory; "seawanhacky" means "land of shells," and wampum was made from shells.

The Barnstable group was not the first to attempt settlement. Eight persons of English descent, including one woman and one infant, were forcibly expelled from Oyster Bay by order of Peter Stuyvesant in 1640. It was an area of hot contention between Dutch New Netherlands and British New England for many years. Even the Treaty of Hartford in 1650, establishing what is now the Connecticut-Massachusetts-New York boundary and extending along the western side of Oyster Bay harbor, failed to settle the question. Much sabre rattling, several conflicting court decisions and the British capture of New Amsterdam occurred before land titles were finally established in the 1660's.

The Dutch claim of title to Centre Island began with the purchase of a "small island at high tide" from the Matinecocks in 1650 by Messrs. Lockermans, Ruysen and Backer. The price is unknown but

the deed of sale was in the possession of the Smith family until destroyed in the Smith homestead fire of 1898. The English chain of title stems from a patent to the Earl of Sterling from Charles I for most of Long Island, and the Southold town records indicate that a sailor named Sinderman or Sunderland bought both Centre Island and Lloyd Neck from the Earl for 10 shillings in 1639. In any case, in 1666, Centre Island, still uninhabited but probably lumbered and perhaps farmed, was bought by the town of Oyster Bay. The town immediately set about selling parcels for speculation and farming, and Plum Point was purchased by the son of the renowned Captain John Underhill and remained in the Underhill family until the late 19th century.

Captain Underhill, son of an English knight, soldier of fortune, described by New England puritans as a "swashbuckler, heretic and Gay Lothario," once made a "noisy intrusion of the City Tavern of New Amsterdam, caused damage and insulted diners," married for the second time a beautiful girl 34 years his junior, and followed his son to Oyster Bay, settling at Matinecock (along the present Beaver Dam wetlands) in 1667. Underhill was well-known on Long Island for exterminating the Massapequa Indians of the South Shore in 1653, the same year as the founding of Oyster Bay. This was the only large scale Indian battle on Long Island. The Matinecocks were known for their ability to accommodate the European settlers.

Daniel Denton, who in 1670 published the first description in English of Long Island, had this to say about the native people

To say something of the Indians, there is now but few upon the (Long) Island, and those few no ways hurtful but rather serviceable to the English, and it is to be admired, how strangely they have decreast by the Hand of God, since the English first settling of those parts...that where the English come to settle, a Divine Hand makes way for them, by removing or cutting off the Indians either by Wars one with the other, or by some raging mortal Disease.

Early deeds refer to Centre Island as either Matinecong Island or Hog (sometimes Hogg) Island, after an early cartographer, not the animal of the same name. It was an island through the post-European era; a map published in 1844 contains the first example of the name Centre Island, presumably named because of its central location in the harbor.

Bayville, like the former Mosquito Cove now known as Glen Cove, is also a new name. Until the late 19th century, it was called Oak Neck, and since the 17th century fishermen who settled there had an unsavory reputation. According to Daniel Youngs, writing in 1907, the Oak Neck settlers and their descendants

were of English descent, literally it was descent. Their houses were generally one story high, merely fisherman's huts with poultry, pigs and an occasional cow kept in close proximity.

Every individual was designated by a name which was derived from some circumstance or peculiarity, well authenticated instances are recalled where individuals neglected to answer to their Christian names from the habit of answering only to nicknames. Intemperate of questionable veracity and honesty...They gave to the very name of their place a stigma which generations of respectable citizens who succeeded them, could not eradicate. This actually drove their successors to change the name from Oak Neck, appropriate as it was, to Bayville of questionable significance and commonplace at best.

In 1683, Joseph Ludlam began to assemble plots until he was in possession of most of the Island. On the wall of the Village Hall there is a large map of Centre Island, donated to the Village by Thurston Smith, showing the Ludlam purchases from 1683 to 1743. The Ludlam family farmed the land, although at first they may have been only summer residents. Gravestones dating from 1698 can be found in the Ludlam-Smith family graveyard, which gate is opposite the Pell driveway. The Hills' house near the entrance to the

Island stands on an 18th century foundation which once supported a Ludlam family farmhouse.*

The first Smith, Thomas, was the nephew of a ferryboatman whose ferry house was on the Matinecock shore. As the result of his uncle's urging, Thomas bought the southern half of Centre Island from Joseph Ludlam in 1743, one year before his uncle drowned. Thomas and his wife Pheobe settled on Centre Island in 1753.

Daniel Youngs (of the Youngs' Farm family), who married a Smith daughter of a later generation, wrote the following:

Thomas and Pheobe Allen Smith had ten children: Freeloove, Pheobe, Mary, Abraham, Sarah, Thomas, Jacob, Isaac, Elizabeth and Margaret. Living seven miles from the nearest village, the children were educated at home and had religious training. The farm produced all the food: wheat and rye, beef, pork, mutton and poultry. From flax and wool, the spinning wheel, hand loom and needle produced garments and textiles. Hides were tanned to be used for shoes and breeches, and skilled workmen went from place to place, boarded by their employers. Implements of labor were crude, wrought at the village forge and required muscle and skill in use.

The wife and mother bore her share of household duties: a bevy of ten laborers, dependent bond-servants were lodged, fed at the kitchen table and nursed in illness. Elder children helped care for the younger. In those

*The oldest existing building on the Island is the Tilney house, built about 1820.

times many children died in infancy, and women at an early age, and contagious diseases were rife.

The late John Parkinson, Jr. of Centre Island, in his introduction to the 1963 republication of W. P. Stephens' history of the Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club, captured the Oyster Bay scene during the Revolution:

Long Island and Oyster Bay were in British possession throughout most of the Revolutionary War, but prior to Washington's defeat at Brooklyn the Loyalists were disarmed. After that the Colonial rebels had to flee to the Connecticut shores or go under cover. Public sentiment generally favored the King, although the local Oyster Bay shipyard at the foot of Ship Point Lane was burnt by Colonial sympathizers soon after it was seized by the British. A Hessian regiment and other units were quartered in the area and wintered in the town. Among them was Colonel Simcoe's Queen's Ranger Huzzars, a quite stylish corps which was the only King's unit permitted to enlist American loyalists. Colonel Simcoe lodged at Raynham Hall and the famous legend of his meeting there with illfated Major Andre is too well-known for detailed inclusion here. Briefly, Samuel Townsend's lovely daughters, Sally and Audrey, had charmed the British officers into believing them strong supporters of the King. However, their brother, Robert, was one of Washington's most trusted spies in New York. Sally overheard part of a whispered conversation between Andre and Simcoe concerning Benedict Arnold's intended betrayal of West Point. Through Captain Daniel Young of Oyster Bay, an undercover patriot, she sent a warning message to her brother in New York

which finally resulted in Major Andre's capture and execution as a spy. On a tour of Long Island after the War, General Washington stopped at Captain Young's house for lunch and pronounced it in his diary "private and very neat and decent."

The fertile Oyster Bay countryside soon became the principal foraging area of the British forces in the North, and the inhabitants suffered from their forays as well as from Colonial raiding parties from the Connecticut shore. British warships were in and out of the harbor and wintered in Cold Spring Harbor. A small fort, Fort Franklin, was established on Lloyds Neck, and an armed schooner was maintained as a guardship nearby. In July, 1781, a fleet of three French frigates and five armed brigs attacked this fort and landed 450 men on the east side of the Neck, which they believed was not covered by the cannon of Fort Franklin. However, the British had the day before armed that side of the fort with two 12-pounders from the guardship. Grapeshot from these guns caused the French to retreat to their ships in some confusion.*

The Colonial raiding parties from Connecticut are an interesting example of early commando warfare. The Revolutionists used light cedar whaleboats, 32 to 35 feet long, with as many

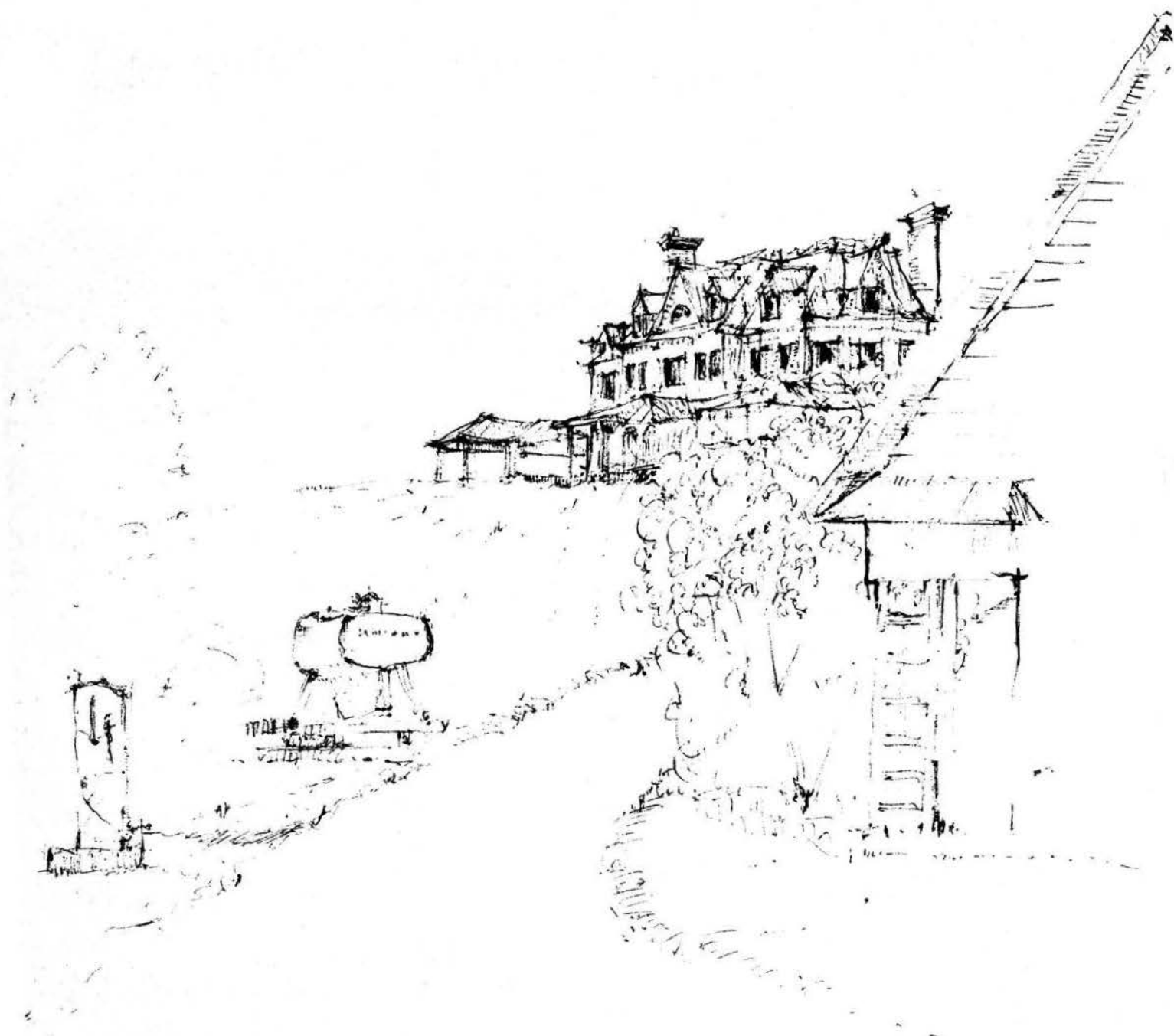
*This battle was observed by one of the Ludlam boys, William, standing near Plum Point - the only battle between nations observed from Centre Island.

as 20 oars. One of these, described as having "2 good sails and a large swivel," sometimes carried a heavy gun in her bow. They were easily hidden in beach grass, and could even be carried across Long Island to Great South Bay. They also cruised in the Sound and preyed on British shipping. Captain Brewster of Seatauket, now Port Jefferson, maintained a secret fleet of about 12 whaleboats which carried couriers, spies, and escaped prisoners back and forth across the Sound to Bridgeport on a rough schedule. The crews of these boats, many of them refugees from Long Island, inevitably were a tough corps and some of them became quite piratical, raiding friend or foe for their own benefit to the further discomfiture of various Oyster Bay inhabitants.

Thomas Smith became Justice of the Peace (or King's Justice) for Oyster Bay, a very important post, and remained a loyal Tory throughout the Revolution. In 1774 he wrote his brother:

I expect you have seen what the delegates have agreed upon and recommend it to ye Colonists which in my opinion is boldly bidding defiance to Gr. Br. You will observe that they recommend to ye Marchant not to sell their goods at a higher rate than they had done a twelve month past. Notwithstanding they have raised it 20 percent and on some small articles such as pins 50 percent.

Ye wholesale Marchant I believe have a scheme to Get Great Profit out of ye farmers. Those of them and their connections that are concerned in ye Dutch trade Pretend to be great Advocates of what they call Liberty. But it



Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club from boat yard.

is to their interest to make a Rought
against Government and deceive ye people.
With a pretense that Gr. Br. hath a design
to inflame them.

I for my part think that as Gr. Br. Defends
and Protects ye Colonists she has ye right
to regulate trade but not to lay internal
taxes upon ye Colonists and ye Colonies I
think ought to Pay some Proportion of ye
Navy and ye fleet. And I think if Gr. Br.
will be content to Raise it by duties on
Furin Articles of Luxury it will be much
more agreeable to me than to raise it ye
way of land Tax...

We have had a Very Dry Season though in some
places ye Indian Corn is Good. I have a
great crop as much or more than I ever had
in one year before. I had 40 Bu of Flax
Seed of 4 acres. Ye Price of Seed is Nine
and Sixpence. Pork I expect will center
near what it was last year. I haste as
Hendrick is waiting for this letter.

From your Brother

Thomas Smith

To Isaac Smith, Esq.

Nov. ye 9th Day 1774

Oyster Bay, Hogg Island, N. Y.

Thomas Smith was an honorable, kind and just man, who was
so respected that despite his outspoken Royalist sympathies, he
continued as Justice after the Revolution. However, during the
war he had a hard time. George Washington, in one of his published
letters, instructed his whaleboat men to raid Centre Island. Ac-
cording to Long Island's well-known nineteenth century historian,

Henry Onderdonk:

Thomas Smith of Oyster Bay was a gentleman long in the commission of the peace, of the utmost veracity and in affluent circumstances.

Living adjoining the Sound so many attempts were made by the rebels from New England to take him off, that they obliged him to remove from home, and for more than four years before the close of the War he lodged every night with some friend or acquaintance, making it a rule never to sleep two nights running at one house.

By this means he escaped their vigilance.

His house however was twice broken open, plundered and robbed, his wife insulted, his daughters abused and his sons carried off prisoners to Connecticut.

Thomas died in 1795, leaving his Centre Island properties including the "Homestead," destroyed by fire in 1898, to his sickly son Jacob. (Originally, Jacob was to get his father's Cove Neck property and another son the Centre Island property. The other son's wife, however, objected to being cut off from Oyster Bay society.) Thomas' will also directs that "a sufficiency of firewood" should be brought from "my lands at Laurel Hollow" and from the lands on Cove Neck, for his wife and unmarried daughters, and that a horse and chaise be kept on Centre Island for their use.

The will evinces Thomas' considerable concern about his slaves: "preserving the privilege in the kitchen for my two negroes Harry and Pegg: and that my negro Sam work with my son Jacob 2 years from the date thereof and then to be free if he

behaves himself to my son's pleasure, and also James, Tim and Dick to work with my son Jacob till they arrive at the age Sam was when set free, and then each of them to be set free... provided they take their liberty by law."

Jacob Smith, according to an unpublished family history, had a

physical condition...not of that robust type which characterized the family generally. Frequent slight indisposition, exaggerated by a nervous temperament, rendered him inadequate to the profitable pursuit of his vocation much of the time...Owing to his infirmity the farm could not be cared for with timely provision for future production, or even present return, and rich and retentive as the soil was naturally, it became much reduced in productive capacity. It is probable that there was another and more potent reason for this exhaustion, in constant cropping, without returning to the soil for replenishment a portion of the plant food extracted. The fact had not been practically demonstrated in this new country, that as fertile as the virgin soil may be, constant cropping without a return to the land of at least a portion of the extracted plant constituents, will certainly exhaust it."

Jacob's son, Daniel, took after his grandfather and became one of the most innovative and well-known farmers in the state as well as a successful entrepreneur.

Daniel married Frances Wortman, whose family lived at Ship Point, on July 3, 1810. Ship Point, incidentally, was famous as a setting for baptismal services, regardless of season, by the Reverend Marmaduke Earle during his long pastorate -- 1801-1858 -- of the Oyster Bay Baptist Church. The Wortmans always had a "warm room ready for the refreshment of the candidates." According to Daniel Youngs:

The following day the wedding party sailed across the Bay to Centre Island, amid the harbor craft gaily decorated in bunting and with the booming of the Revolutionary cannon at the base of the village Liberty pole, fired in honor of the 34th anniversary of American Independence.

Daniel increased crop production, using menhaden as fertilizer. His fields in winter became boarding pastures for carriage horses from New York City. He also started a highly successful brickyard which was to operate for fifty years. The former brickyard's canal and drying areas are now part of the Castroviejo property.

John Parkinson wrote the following on Centre Island life in Daniel's time:

Besides the Smiths, the Ludlams and Underhills maintained fruitful farms on Centre Island, and in 1850 Daniel Smith, son of Thomas, opened a successful brickyard at the southwest end where there was fine clay. All bulk supplies were brought in by schooners which were run ashore at high tide to be unloaded when the water level dropped. It is interesting that soon after the first settlers arrived facilities for hauling and repairing vessels were established in the Seawanhaka Clubhouse cove. The Smith family owned the Sarah Elizabeth which carried their hay, potatoes, apples and cider to New York for sale. Of course there was no road between Centre Island and the mainland, and all transportation had to be by water. Daniel Smith must have been an enterprising young man, as he also established a fertilizer business by seining the numerous fish (menhaden) in Oyster Bay. Using successively larger nets he finally developed one that landed wagon loads of a ton or more in one

sweep onto the island beach. Evidently there was generous hospitality at the Smith Homestead - dancing for the young, boating, bathing, fishing, and shooting. Quail, partridge, and duck were abundant. Smith was a keen sport fisherman, but kept his own counsel as to where the largest blackfish were to be found. Pleasure sailing parties were organized with every expectation of spending the night becalmed far out in the Sound.

Actually, Daniel moved from Centre Island to Matinecock about 1840, where he lived in the house built by Captain Underhill's son. The day to day operation of the Centre Island farm was left to two of Daniel's sons. His sons prospered: one, Charles, built what is now the Burr house in 1871. But financial, scientific, and technical forces were abroad in post-Civil War America that would alter the Smith family's traditional ways and drastically change many aspects of life on Centre Island.

Toward the end of the 19th Century there were three major developments that rendered Centre Island more attractive to new residents. One was the construction of the Long Island Rail Road from New York City to the heartland of Long Island giving the produce farmers and bay fishermen rapid access to the tables of New Yorkers. The insularity of farm and cove was refreshed by the migration of early suburbanites who located new houses and apartments in reasonable proximity to the railroad.

A second major development was the invention of the internal combustion engine and its rapid adaptation as a means of locomotion on land and water. The installation of the engine in launches quickly increased the social and commercial intercourse among local communities.

The third and most important aspect to the growth of Centre Island was the construction in 1892 of the Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club clubhouse on the Island. The members of the Club, founded in 1871, had long envisioned locating a permanent station on the water in some area outside of New York City, where the vagaries of wind and constantly increasing shipping made sailing

in New York Bay more rigorous than refreshing. The opening of the clubhouse in the spring of 1892 served to introduce a number of members to the Island, and shortly thereafter members began purchasing acreage for summer houses.

The east coast in the 1890's was sympathetic to the indulgence of summer. In Newport, architects, McKim, Mead & White, Richard Morris Hunt and H. H. Richardson were building large frame houses dubbed the "Shingle Style" for the flamboyant and articulate use of wood used in their construction. These houses established a new level of residential sophistication, and similar colonies developed at Bar Harbour, Southampton, and Monmouth Beach. Each exhibited characteristics in common: imposing summer cottages near the ocean in which families could reside in comfort.

Centre Island followed true to course; Colgate Hoyt, a mining magnate from Cleveland, purchased in 1893 a large belt of land approximately one-third the way down the Island bounded on the east by the outer harbor and on the west by West Harbor in order to build his summer cottage. The Hoyt house was completed in 1895. In the meantime, Hoyt's neighbor to the north, Charles Wetmore, was busy with the plans for his house. More formal than the Hoyt house, Wetmore borrowed from the lexicon of early Tudor manor houses to develop his carefully designed residence. Unfortunately, Hoyt's house was destroyed during the Depression and the Wetmore house burned in the 1920's.

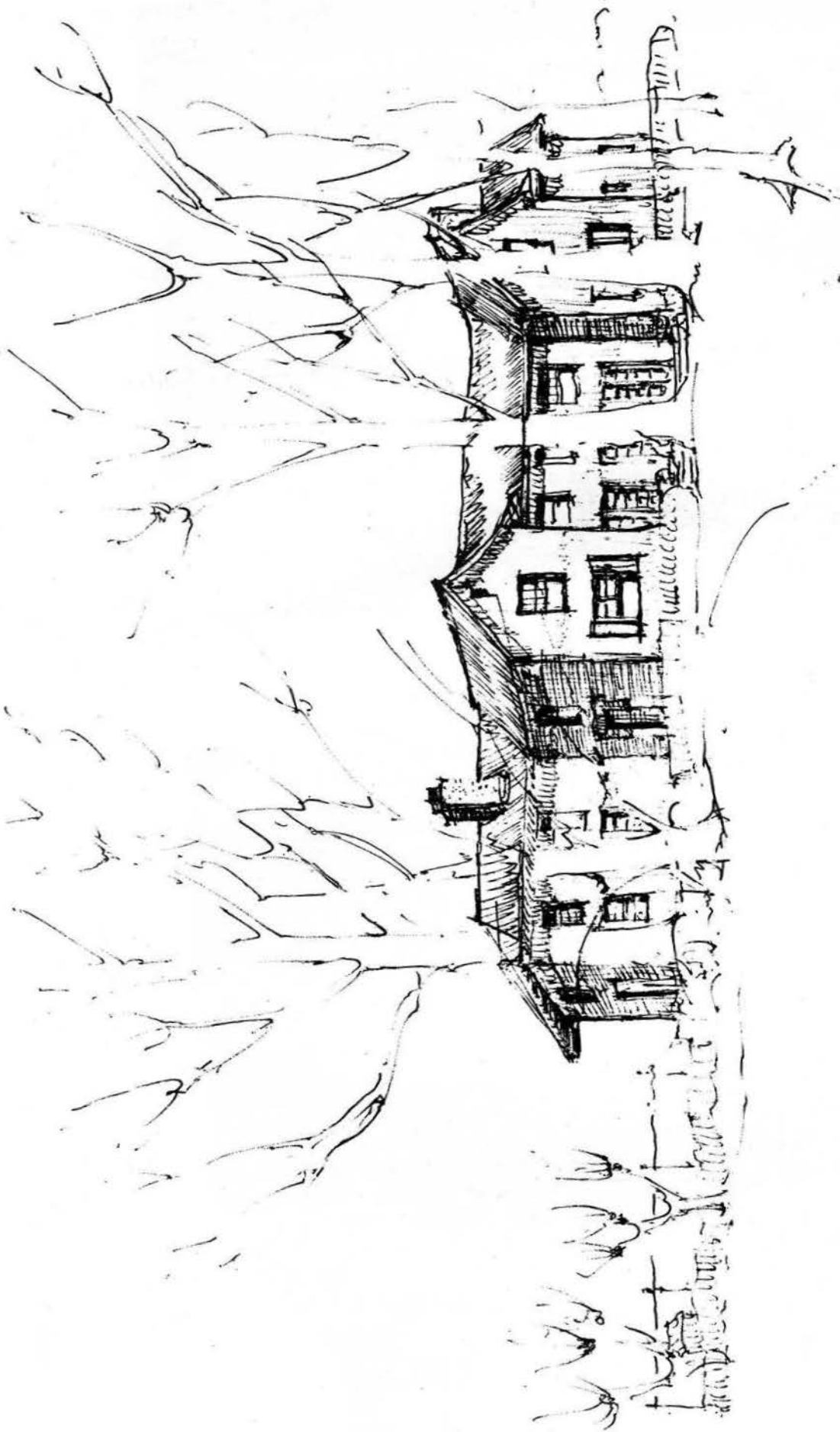
Ormond G. Smith completed construction on his house at North Point some time before 1915; this house also has not survived. When Smith moved to the Island, he was President of Smith and Street Publishers, one of the largest publishing houses in the world. The company was the premier publishing firm for pulp novels and weeklies. Its myriad contributing writers included Bret Harte, A. Conan Doyle, Horatio Alger, Theodore Dreiser, O. Henry, Zane Grey, Jack London and Max Brand. Other publications included the Merriwell series that took Frank Merriwell from Fardale Academy through four years of Yale where each year Merriwell defeated Harvard singlehanded in the last minute of play to win the game. Smith and Street also published the Alger series. Some of the Smith and Street magazines were Aintrees, Popular, Nick Carter and Mademoiselle.

Two other early houses, fortunately still existing, should be mentioned, because they are so similar in design and intent. The present DeDampierre residence was built in 1908 by the architect Clinton MacKenzie for his own use. No sooner was this effort complete than he was asked by his new neighbor, Henry Rusch, if he would design a house for the Rusch family. MacKenzie accepted, and gave Centre Island its first attempt at master planning. Both houses are similar in appearance, finished in dark brown stucco and tiled roofs, the Rusch house green, the DeDampierre building red; this nautical metaphor is still visible. The outbuildings continue the theme, the Rusch campanile set off against the DeDampierre garage.

Prior to 1909 and the opening of the Queensborough Bridge, travellers to Centre Island leaving mid-town Manhattan booked passage on the 59th Street Ferry to Long Island City. At Long Island City they boarded a Long Island Rail Road train powered by steam to Oyster Bay. Detraining at Oyster Bay, they boarded a private launch across West Harbor to Centre Island. Most launches were about 30 feet long and provided some shelter from the weather. Colgate Hoyt commuted in the original Seawanhaka, still in service at the yacht club, MacKenzie had Chippewa, Smith, Silver Heels, George Bullock, The Walrus and Rusch, Cetus (I, II, III, IV and V).

The Smith Family brickyard, later purchased by the firm of Dun and Dolan, was closed in 1904 as a result of the depletion of the clay deposit. Richard Walsh, its foreman, was retained as superintendent by Clinton MacKenzie. This Mr. Walsh is the father of Louise and Dick Walsh, the former the Village's long time Clerk and the latter its Building Inspector. The Walsh children were educated at a one room schoolhouse, originally located between the present Seedman and Tully properties, and designed to accommodate approximately a dozen students and one schoolmistress. The building, long since moved, is now the Ort house.

One of the few early large houses on the Island to survive is that presently owned by the Oelsners. It was built in 1912 by



Clinton MacKenzie house, built 1908, currently owned by the DeDampierres.

Samuel T. Shaw, owner of the Grand Union Hotel on 14th Street in Manhattan. The house was designed as an Italian country villa with stucco walls, tile roof and porte cochere, and commands splendid water views in three directions. The property was sold by Mr. Shaw to George Brightson,* who lost it in personal bankruptcy. In 1926, a largely unsuccessful attempt was made to auction off the property in 450 separate lots. Shaw was also the builder of the present Williams house, where his son, an artist, lived for many years. Shaw moved his boat house from Plum Point to the south shore of the Island where it now stands as the Schmidt house. Shaw also received credit for the ingenious stone bridge and gazebo at the sharp turn on Centre Island Road.

Another large house which remains intact is the Baker residence. Built by Herbert Smith in 1920 on 14 acres bought from his aunt, Mary Underhill, it was sold in 1927 to Bill Carey, the President of Madison Square Garden, and the man responsible for professional hockey's start in New York City. Mr. Carey was instrumental in bringing the Portland Rosebuds to New York, the progenitors of the New York Rangers. The property reverted to Mrs. Smith during the Depression and was sold to the Bakers.

Building on the Island was suspended during World War I, and about this time the custom of placing lanterns around the shore on the 4th of July died. Also laid to rest was a dispute between the Island residents and the bay men who resented the extension of private docks and piers into the harbor. Mrs. Rusch remembered a group of bay men who in 1910 asserted their rights to the beach by driving a wagon round the Island cutting sections from docks that impeded their progress. For years after this incident, docks were built with hinged boardwalks that could be raised in case the bay men appeared.

*Mr. Brightson was the President of Sonora Phonograph Company, Commodore of the Atlantic Yacht Club, Sea Gate, Brooklyn, and owner of the large schooner Sunshine.

The growth of the Island continued after the war and one of the issues the residents of Centre Island and Bayville addressed during the early 1920's was the construction of bungalows along the beach from Bayville to the entrance of Centre Island. These houses were built on land leased by individuals at a nominal fee from the town of Oyster Bay. They were used as beach houses during the summer and for duck hunting in the fall. The question of who should have the right to the leasehold sites was resolved by the development of a limited public bathing facility on the site, Centre Island Beach, and the eviction of tenants as leases terminated.

The mid span of the 1920's also brought the spectre of unbridled growth and real estate opportunism. The expanding economy provided the impetus to local real estate development, commencing with the Joyce Place subdivisions,* and culminating in 1926 with the Harbour Point auction. Reacting to these events, the residents formed the Incorporated Village of Centre Island with Nelson Burr as the first Mayor. The north end of the Island had to be excluded from the Village because of legal technicalities, but this was rectified in 1930 by a special petition from Isabelle Willys, Robert John Tobler, and William Walker for inclusion of their property at the north end.

Mayor Burr presided at the first Village trustees meeting on April 13, 1926. The Trustees were George Bullock and Franklin Remington, and Michael Petroccia served as Village Clerk. The meeting was held at the old Union Club, Fifth Avenue and 51st Street.

The first budget for the Village of Centre Island approved for fiscal year 1926 (June 1 - May 31) totalled \$18,100 and was itemized as follows:

*Also Roosevelt Road, Mingo Avenue, Cedar Avenue,
Harbor View Road.

Salaries	\$ 600
Printing	650
Fidelity Insurance	100
Highway	4,300
Election Expenses	100
Police	5,000
Office Supplies	500
Fire Protection	1,600
Light	250
Liability Insurance	250
Advances & Incorporation Expenses	4,000
Sanitation	<u>750</u>
TOTAL	\$18,100

In 1926, the civil protection of the Village claimed the largest portion of the budget. Prior to the formation of the Village in 1926, the area south of Yacht Club Road was served by a private cinder road maintained by the property owners on either side. With incorporation, it was no longer appropriate to maintain this private thoroughfare. Edwin and Allen Townsend, residents of Centre Island, lent the money to the Village to construct the remainder of Centre Island Road in its present paved configuration. The item - Highway \$4,300 - was the Village's first year installment on this loan.

It was the practice in the early days of the Village to write a conservative budget to ensure an annual surplus. In 1930 the budget for Centre Island was \$27,200, but disbursements totalled only \$16,035.42; in 1931 disbursements totalled \$12,805; and in 1932 disbursements increased to \$19,387.17.

Nelson Burr served as mayor from incorporation until 1930, when George Bullock succeeded him. Bullock, an ardent horseman who maintained a special barge to transport his horses across the bay to Cove Neck, owned the present Palmer property, and built the neo-gothic residence and boat house that still stands. He served only a portion of his first term before his death, and he was succeeded by Deputy Mayor Franklin Remington, who built and lived in the present Cochran house.

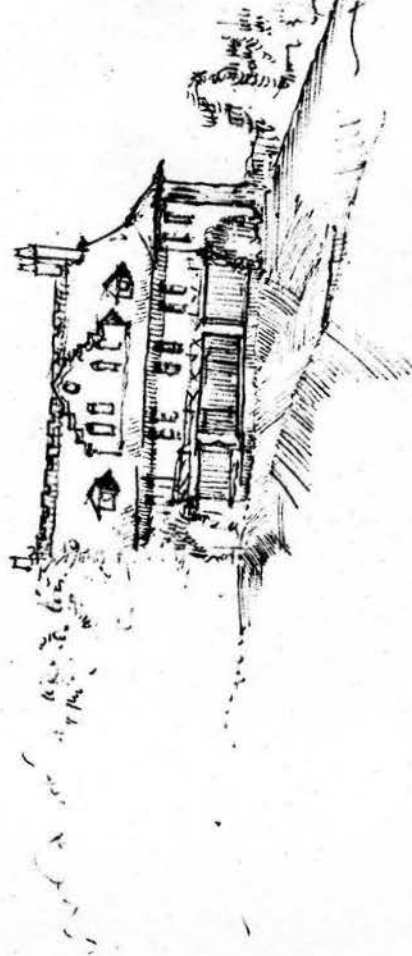
When Remington succeeded as Mayor he had just lost a proxy battle for control of the company he had run for twenty-seven years. In an atrociously titled but delightfully engaging autobiography, Brawn and Brains, Remington recounts his experience from a childhood on the continent to managing the Foundation Company, one of the largest foundation contracting firms in the world.

During junior year at Harvard, where he won varsity letters in football and rowing, the Remington Firearms Company went into receivership. Remington, a grandson of the inventor and son of the manufacturer of the Remington rifle, experienced substantial financial loss. He was graduated from Harvard in 1887, and shortly thereafter a second blow fell. The modest inheritance passed on to him from his father was lost, leaving Remington with virtually no money and few immediate prospects.

With some experience as a contractor in Chicago, Remington and two partners organized the Foundation Company with capital of \$25,000. Its first contract was for the foundation work at the Whitehall Building. Remington's company went on to become the contractor for foundation and below grade construction of thirty major buildings in Manhattan, including the Cunard, Municipal, Woolworth, J. P. Morgan, Bankers Trust and Federal Reserve buildings. The company built cofferdams, locks and flood control improvements in the United States and in sixteen foreign countries.

One of Remington's first decisions on assuming office as Mayor was to effect savings wherever possible, particularly necessary because of the Depression; the Village Attorney, Winslow Coates, was dismissed and Remington then filed his nominating petition for Mayor at the next election himself...and incorrectly. Nevertheless, he defeated an opposition candidate, Helen Burr, widow of Nelson Burr, through a write-in campaign. It is interesting that the candidacy of Mrs. Burr for Mayor of the Village in 1934 is still the only example of a woman to run for that office.

When Remington became Mayor of the Village he was also President of the Centre Island Association, the local civic organization. In Bulletin No. 1 issued February 19, 1932, Remington wrote:



Samuel T. Shaw house, built 1912, currently owned by the Oelsners.

Your President has carried on an interesting correspondence with the State Conservation Dept. and various associations and societies organized for the protection and propagation of game birds. Considerable data has been gathered bearing on the subject, with the result that it was decided to make a postcard canvass of the members to see if they were willing to spend One Hundred Dollars for the purchase of twenty pairs of English pheasants. Having received 34 votes in favor of making the purchase, and only 3 votes in opposition, it was decided to buy 16 pairs at Five Dollars per pair. This has been done, and thirty-two birds are now at large on the Island. In putting them out now, it is hoped that the birds will get accustomed to their surroundings and will mate in the spring. Later in the year it is proposed to purchase some quail and when all the facts are obtained this will be put before you and your wishes ascertained.

One more quote from Bulletin No. 1 serves to illumine the times.

Insofar as the Town is concerned, there has been an increase of taxes in the sum of \$20,000. This increase, with the single exception of the salary of \$2,000 a year to a Mr. Plummer, a Welfare Dept. officer, who has been conclusively shown to be incompetent but is still carried by the Board on the payroll of the Town, appears to be justified. The following table is illuminating as indicating how the money we pay in taxes is spent:

The county tax rate is based on:	.92 per \$100. of assessed valuation.
The State tax rate is based on:	.02 per \$100. of assessed valuation.

The School tax rate is based on: .18 per \$100. of
assessed valuation.

The Village tax rate is based on: .18 per \$100. of
assessed valuation.

In conclusion, the officers of your Association wish to say that they welcome any suggestions or ideas on the part of members looking towards the improvement of conditions on the Island.

George Bullock, one of the original Trustees, owned two large pieces of land on the Island, one mentioned previously and an earlier acquisition including the present Gubelmann estate. It was here Bullock built his first residence and soon thereafter sold the house and part of the land to Albert E. Smith, Chairman of the Board of American Vita Graph Corporation, an early New York film studio. Smith is responsible for the stern of the old ship, still visible from the harbor. It had formed a portion of a movie set, and Smith had it removed to his new residence on Centre Island.

Prohibition brought rum runners and rum runners soon discovered the landing and storage possibilities on Centre Island. Cases of liquor were delivered by fast launch to a pier near the present Williams' beach cabana. The liquor was stored in the basement of the unoccupied Brightson house. This arrangement continued for some time until Mayor Remington took the matter in hand. The following is a letter dated April 6, 1933 from Remington to Samuel Outerbridge, Trustee.

Dear Sam:

Surprised and glad to get your letter of the 14th of March. You give no address to which your mail should be forwarded so assume you intend to spend some time in Taormina so am sending this letter there.

We had a hectic time soon after you left...Found bootleggers had been landing between 2 - 3000

cases of rum a month all summer. This I subsequently confirmed from one of the bootleggers themselves...Then we had to put a stop to the bootlegging which we were told would be dangerous and had better not be tried. I've kept tab on their movements and one day were tipped off that a cargo was to be landed at 1:00 A.M. with the high tide. 10:30 that night found a sight-seeing empty bus with no lights on parked by the old Smith house up on the hill back of you. They had brought down a gang of unloaders from Brooklyn.

I took a heavy mooring chain down to the entrance of the Island, fastened it across the road between two trees, took two policemen and my chauffeur, armed them each with the rifles in the police station, took my own 45-90 bear rifle, put a couple of cars on either side of the road with headlights shining on the chain and went down there and waited. Waited all night till daybreak and nothing doing...1:00 A.M. the mate of the rum runner came slowly up in his car looked us all over turned around and went back. Nothing doing. Kept this up for a week when we got word they were through with Centre Island and were going elsewhere where it wasn't so unhealthy. That's the end of it. No more rum running since then.

We have now an excellent police force of three men. I think the best force of any village on the Island. One man was on the Penn State Constabulary. Joe makes an excellent sergeant and they are all on their toes. We are funding within our budget. Had to buy a new police car a couple of weeks ago.

Have had the devil of a time with foxes. There are several on the Island and they are eating up our pheasants. Have had three foxhunts - the last one with thirteen hounds but have not bagged one yet. I spent February in Nassau with the Coxes and Bullocks. It was delightful. Everything running smoothly. Hope you will be back before the election in June. Good luck to you Sam. Remember me to Mrs. Outerbridge.

Sincerely,
Franklin Remington

New residents on Centre Island in the 1920's and 1930's included George Armsby, President of Del Monte Foods. He bought the property previously owned by Colgate Hoyt. Cecil P. Stewart purchased what is now the Moore property; he was President of Frank B. Hall, the large insurance agency. John Willys, Chairman of the Board of the Willys-Knight Motor Company, took title to the Smith house on North Point.

One of the new residents was James D. Mooney, who moved to Centre Island from London in 1929, and purchased the present Seedman residence. Mooney, who served as Mayor from 1935 to 1937, was the chief operating officer of General Motors Export Company, a wholly owned subsidiary of General Motors, which in turn owned Vauxhall and Opel Motors. In 1936, he was made a group Vice President with all non-automotive sections of General Motors reporting to him; and in 1938 Mooney was again promoted, this time to Executive Vice President.

After the outbreak of hostilities in September, 1939, Mooney - who had had extensive business dealings with companies in both Allied and Axis countries - was asked by the State Department to undertake a mission of the utmost delicacy: to ascertain the desire of the British and German governments for a negotiated peace settlement. These desperate and ultimately barren secret negotiations took place between January and May 1940.

Before, during and after World War II, softball was the pre-eminent sport on Centre Island. Each Sunday a game was organized and played on Cecil Stewart's field. Stewart provided barrels of lemonade and the local team played all qualified contenders. Once during the war, the Centre Island softball team, also known as Mooney's Might Maulers, was lulled into a false sense of security when challenged by an all girl softball team from Grumman Aviation. The locals were no match for the visitors.

* * * * *

At some point history becomes commentary, and commentary runs the danger of becoming gossip. We have decided to end our brief chronicle while Harry Truman was still President, the Oyster Bay trains were still steam driven and the nearest major league team to Centre Island was still the Brooklyn Dodgers. Suffice it to say that a lot has happened in the last thirty years which future historians will have the pleasure of recording.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief chronicle makes no claims to completeness, or even to complete acquaintance with its sources. These sources include generous interviews granted us by Monson Burr, Pat Outerbridge, Eda and Henry Rusch, Billy Weekes, Fred Tilney, Jim Mooney, Dick and Louise Walsh and Thurston and Ruth Smith. They also include an unpublished history of Centre Island by Daniel K. Youngs, written in 1907 and expanded by Raymond Smith in 1944. Thurston Smith lent us a copy of this manuscript. Another unpublished work, Oyster Bay in History, written by Frances and Clara Irvin in the late 1940's and currently on file in the Oyster Bay Public Library, was helpful. As for published material, the 1963 edition of the three volume history of the Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club by W. P. Stephens and edited and expanded by John Parkinson, Jr., is so complete and well-written that we did not involve ourselves with the Yacht Club's long and distinguished past. Finally, mention should be made of the Garvey's Point Indian Museum, a source of inspiration as well as information about prehistorical times, and the Long Island Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, where more of everything about Long Island can be found than anywhere else.