

The property now defined as Gooseberry Beach was, in the late 19th century, part of an estate known as 'Rocky Farm.' This property, owned by John Alfred Hazard and his wife, Nancy, included land surrounding the Lily Pond, extending south to the ocean. In 1880 Hazard bequeathed his 'Rocky Farm' estate to the Newport Hospital.

The hospital maintained ice houses on the Lily Pond, cutting and selling ice in the winter. There was minimal revenue with this type of land use, and in 1891 the Board of Directors decided to raise money for enlarging the hospital by selling off parts of its 'Rocky Farm' estate. The timing was opportune as the famed 'Newport Society' building boom was spreading toward the Ocean Drive area with all of its natural beauty. The first twelve acres were sold in 1894, and other properties sold quickly. One of the earliest sales was to Stuyvesant Fish who built the beautiful 'Crossways.' Other magnificent 'summer cottages' erected during this period included 'High Tide,' owned by J. Washington Frazier, and 'Seafields,' owned by George Henry Warren, all built with magnificent views, overlooking what is now Gooseberry Beach.

The Newport Hospital initially maintained ownership of the actual beach property, but it eventually sold the western portion to a group which formed to build the private facility, Viking (Hazard's) Beach. The eastern portion (today's Gooseberry Beach), consisting of approximately ten acres, continued to be held by the hospital whose Board of Directors allowed the property to be used for public swimming and sunbathing.

To appreciate the history of Gooseberry Beach, it is helpful to understand the development of Newport's residential areas. Most of Newport's early 19th century population was centered in the northern harbor area. From the mid-19th century Irish immigration period, through the first decades of the 20th century, the population of Newport increased dramatically. Between 1850 and 1920, the population growth created new neighborhoods in the southern Thames Street area. These densely populated neighborhoods were located between the summer estates on the hill, Thames Street and the waterfront below. This residential area provided the housing for workers serving the resort community: factory workers and machinists; carpenters and painters; stevedores and shipbuilders, seamen and fishermen; storekeepers and clerks; grocers and teamsters; dressmakers and bakers. This was the original population of the soon-to-be famous 'Fifth Ward'.

These new neighborhoods contained modest single family houses, rental cottages and tenements. The population was predominantly immigrant Irish, and second/third-generation natives of Irish and English descent. Additionally, the area continued to attract newly arriving English, Scottish, Italian and Portuguese immigrant workers. The southern Thames Street area flourished. These were the neighborhoods of Newport's proud working class. Families were close and households large. Religion, patriotism, heritage and a spirit of community were all important aspects of family life and social activity.

Politically, the southern Thames Street area was designated the 'fifth ward,' a name no longer accurate as a political entity, but a term used proudly to designate a sense of community. These mostly working class 'fifth ward' families were the ones who used the hospital's 'public' beach extensively. There were no amenities, no facilities; only a place where hard-working families could spend some time together enjoying the natural beauty of the beach.

In the early 1950's a group known as the 'Hazard Beach Parking Association' was formed. This group, with a lease from the Newport Hospital, began using the east end of the property as a parking lot, charging a nominal fee to park. The money generated was used for the general maintenance of the beach; however, the Rhode Island State Legislature passed a bill sponsored by Newport Representative Charles L. Walsh, requiring that, 'beach lots with a 100 car capacity charging a fee to park must have licensed facilities and lifeguards.' Financially, this would not have been feasible since the minimal parking revenues would not have offset the expenses. The Hazard Beach Parking Association offered to reduce the parking area by one half, but this was regarded as an attempt to circumvent the law. The Newport Hospital, not wanting to become embroiled in a controversy, did not renew the Association's lease, and, for liability reasons, blocked access to the parking area by placing large boulders across the entrance. Users of the beach started to park on the Ocean Drive, causing numerous complaints to the police. A solution had to be found.

It became known to a group of people who regularly used the beach that the Newport Hospital was willing to negotiate the sale of the property. The problem was where or even whether the money could be found. Many families regularly enjoyed the beach, but most of these families had limited financial resources. Additionally, the already established Hazard's Beach expressed an interest in purchasing the property for expansion. On June 13, 1952, the City of Newport's Board of Aldermen revealed that the City was negotiating to buy the property. In any case, it appeared that the ownership of the beach would be denied to the families who had enjoyed and maintained it over the decades.

On June 23, 1952, the hospital and the city arrived at a price of \$10,000 for the property. With an amount established, the regular users of the beach organized. They became known as the 'Fifth Ward Group' and were represented by John F. Phelan, an attorney whose family regularly used the beach. On June 26, 1952, Mr. Phelan notified the Hospital that the group he represented was also interested in purchasing the property.

On June 29, 1952, the Fifth Ward Group held a public meeting at Hibernian Hall. Of those attending, 125 people pledged more than \$10,000 to purchase the property. Several of Newport's Aldermen attended the meeting, including 'Fifth Ward' resident Henry DeCotis, and the president of Hazard's Beach, Emil Jemall. Both spoke in favor of the sale of the property to the Fifth Ward Group. On June 30, 1952, the City of Newport and Hazard's Beach contacted the hospital and withdrew their offers.

The Fifth Ward Group had no opposition. Its finances had increased as 137 people pledged \$13,700 for the purchase. On July 8, 1952, representatives of the hospital's board met with representatives of the Fifth Ward Group to negotiate the specifics of the sale. Reaching agreement for the hospital were Edward F. Byrnes, acting president, John Weiser, secretary, and George Harrison. Representing the Fifth Ward Group were John Phelan, Andrew Healy and Paskie Flack. On July 9, 1952, an agreement was reached. The Trustees of the Newport Hospital would sell the property to Gooseberry Beach, Incorporated, a Rhode Island corporation composed of shareholders who had each pledged \$100 for the purchase of the beach. Initial shares in the corporation were sold at \$100 each, the amount of the original pledges.

On Saturday, July 12, 1952, the actual signing took place. The ownership of the 1100 foot beach frontage property was

transferred to Gooseberry Beach, Inc. for the price of \$10,000. The families who had been enjoying the beach for decades assumed control of its future. On July 13, 1952, the corporation shareholders met and elected the Board of Directors for Gooseberry Beach. The officers of that first board were: John Phelan, chairman, Fred Newton, president, Thomas Kelly, vice-president, Quinton Murphy, treasurer, and Emily Seegar, secretary. The remaining board members were: Thomas Conheeny, William Ewart, Joseph Kirwin, John L. Murphy, Andrew Healy, Dr. Daniel Russo, Humphrey Donnelly, Paskie Flack, and Harold Brown. At this meeting it was agreed to establish a parking fee of fifty cents (\$.50) for daily parking with a seasonal parking rate of three dollars (\$3.00). Volunteer help would operate Gooseberry Beach through its initial season.

The membership acted quickly. Plans were made to provide bathhouse, bathroom and shower facilities for the 1953 summer season. For \$1,000 the beach obtained an unused structure from the City of Newport, containing rest room fixtures and plumbing. On October 31, 1952, the Corporation was able to purchase the ornate clubhouse originally part of T. Suffern (Tommy) Taller's Ocean Drive golf links. The building was moved and set up in the parking lot of the beach. Throughout the fall, winter and spring of 1952-53, volunteers repaired, re-shingled, and renovated the clubhouse which was to become a facility for the social functions of Gooseberry Beach members. Bathhouses and a concession were added in preparation for the summer of 1953.

The 4th of July, 1953, marked the official opening of Gooseberry Beach. Members and guests joined with city and state officials for a formal dedication ceremony. Guests were welcomed to the party which followed, celebrating the culmination of years of organizing, planning, negotiating, and working to make Gooseberry Beach a tangible reality.

The beach continued into the 1954 season. Members and guests enjoyed the amenities. Many adults, and particularly the older children, spent much of their summer diving from the Gooseberry raft which had been obtained from neighboring Bailey's Beach. On August 31, 1954, 'Hurricane Carol' pounded Newport, devastating Gooseberry Beach. Hurricane winds and tidal surges created waves which leveled the beach. Dunes, vegetation and the new structures were destroyed. Much of the wreckage, including the raft, ended up in the Lily Pond. Individual members suffered losses, but collectively, for all intents and purposes, Gooseberry Beach was destroyed.

Fortunately however, the membership responded with positive action. At a shareholders' meeting on March 11, 1955, they voted to rebuild the beach for the 1955 summer season. It was decided to relocate the main structure from the center of the property to the western section, using the existing rock formations as a natural protection from storms. Additionally, the new bathhouses were to be built on a concrete platform, raising the structures to more than twelve feet above sea level. Fifty seven bathhouses, an office and rest rooms were built on this platform in time for the opening of the 1955 summer season.

The membership, all too well aware of the awesome power of the wind and ocean, demonstrated excellent foresight in the rebuilding of the beach. Choosing a site that afforded some natural protection and pouring solid foundations have proven to be wise decisions. For nearly forty years the rebuilt structure has survived, weathering numerous storms and hurricanes.

Throughout the years, many improvements have been made

been made to the beach and its facilities. To accommodate the needs of the growing membership, sixty additional bathhouses have been added. In 1967 Schanil Hall was built. Over the years, the membership of Gooseberry Beach has used this hall for meetings as well as for numerous beach and social functions. Individual members have taken the opportunity to use Schanil Hall to host weddings, reunions, anniversaries, etc. for their friends and relatives.

For nearly forty years, Gooseberry Beach has been an integral part of Newport's tourist industry. The beach, which has continued to remain open to the public, attracts many daily users and seasonal vacationers. The membership has been proud to open its facilities to its thousands of daily and seasonal guests. Many families continue to return year after year, appreciating the natural beauty of the beach and the sincere hospitality of its staff and membership.

Over the years Gooseberry Beach has demonstrated an ability to both grow and improve. Facilities, services, and amenities have been added, yet, the Gooseberry Beach of today is the result of the continual effort to retain the purpose and integrity of its original founders. It continues to be a 'privately' owned beach open to the public. Many Board members and officers today are the children of the original members. The idea of a safe, clean, efficiently operated family beach has been the legacy carried on by the generations who remain and will continue to remain an integral part of Gooseberry Beach.

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