



A SHORT HISTORY
OF THE
MCKIM, MEAD & WHITE
ASSOCIATION HOUSES
ON THE MONTAUK CLIFFS

written by
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Benson's Purchase of Montauk

On October 22, 1879 Mr. Arthur W. Benson of Brooklyn, N. Y. purchased almost all of Montauk Point, N.Y. for the sum of \$151,000 at an auction attended by the assembled East Hampton proprietors who wished to sell the land their ancestors had acquired from the Montauk Indians two and a half centuries before. The proprietors went home disappointed, according to the records of the time, having expected to receive over \$200,000 for the sale of their grazing lands. Not long after the sale Benson negotiated with the few remaining Indian families for their relocation to a place called Freetown near East Hampton. Litigation on behalf of Indian rights, as well as litigation concerning hunting and fishing rights of the former East Hampton owners, persisted years into the twentieth century. But with Benson's purchase, the third wave of Montauk inhabitants was well on its way to changing the usage of Montauk.

The Montauk Association and Olmsted

In the words of Raymond Smith in the application he prepared in 1976 for the National Register of Historic Places, Montauk Association Historic District:

Benson envisioned an exclusive resort colony of summer cottages to be developed at Montauk Point, and toward this end interested several of his New York associates in the enterprise. Benson's group, which included lawyers Robert and Henry de Forest, in 1881 commissioned noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to plan the site. Other New York friends soon joined with the original group to form the Montauk Association the same year. The membership included businessmen Henry Sanger and Alfred M. Hoyt, author William L. Andrews, merchant and financier Alexander E. Orr, and Cornelius R. Agnew, a prominent ophthalmologist. Olmsted's Plan for the Montauk Association colony utilized

existing contours, taking maximum advantages of vistas and prevailing sea breezes. The asymmetrical design placed individual structures in a natural setting along a ridge facing the Atlantic. Connecting the buildings of the complex was a maze of unpaved roads and trails. The natural coastal marshes and tangled undergrowth of the Montauk peninsula became integral elements in Olmsted's overall scheme.

McKim, Mead and White

After the Montauk Association was formed in 1881, the fairly young architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White was consulted. Charles McKim and Stanford White had met while both were working in the office of architect H. H. Richardson. Harvard educated and a few years older than White, McKim left to start his own firm McKim, Bigelow and Mead. White, only 16 years old when he started with Richardson, continued his apprenticeship, becoming a highly skilled draughtsman under Richardson's tutelage. A trip made by McKim, Bigelow, Mead and White in 1877 to New England coastal towns provided the men with design ideas inspired by Colonial architecture. A trip to France in the summer of 1878 made by McKim and White further expanded their knowledge. White stayed in Europe for over a year at that time, returning to America with a wealth of sketches.

Stanford White joined McKim's firm soon after his return from Europe in September 1879. Young men, full of talent in a city fairly bursting with new ventures and the money to fund them, McKim, Mead and White were already commanding a noted reputation. According to David Garrard Lowe, author of Stanford White's New York, McKim was known as the intellect of the team, White the heart and Mead the keeper of order. "Looking at the firm's logo, a caravel under sail with the legend 'Vogue la Galere' 'let the ship sail on,' one wag said that while

White was the sail of the ship and McKim the hull, Mead was the rudder.”

The Association Houses

The group of buildings which McKim, Mead and White designed for the Montauk Association included a central clubhouse, a laundry, a large stable and seven cottages. The clubhouse, started in 1881 and completed in 1883, was the first structure to be built. According to Raymond Smith, “While the central clubhouse was under construction, each member of the Montauk Association commissioned McKim, Mead and White to design his own cottage, to be built on one of the plots flanking the clubhouse in accordance with Olmsted’s site plan. McKim, Mead and White prepared plans for each of the seven Association houses in 1882, and all were built by the end of 1883.”

Although the houses today are somewhat hidden by the riot of vegetation which has grown up since the 1880’s, when they were built vegetation was at a minimum. Once primarily moorland, Montauk’s gentle hills were grazed by domestic animals for many years before Benson’s ownership. The houses were easily seen one by the other and just as readily seen as sister sentinels by those passing on the Atlantic.

There are some similar elements found in all of the houses, but each is very distinctly itself and quite different from the others. Excellent examples of the shingle style of resort architecture popular from 1880 to 1900, the houses bear elements of the colonial revival style also made popular by McKim, Mead and White. All of the houses are characterized by their gabled roofs, inventive shingle covering, interior balustrades and wide, inviting verandas. Despite the obvious reliance of the architects on their classical training, what mostly strikes one is the fresh, even experimen-

tal quality of these houses. They were built solidly for rugged living both outside and inside, yet they have a spaciousness and utilization of light that is quite modern in feeling. There are wonderful small touches in the detailing of exteriors and interiors on all the houses, indicating an element of humor and playfulness on the part of the designers. One comes away feeling that they really enjoyed this project!

All the houses are distinguished by their siting so that the best use of the prevailing summer breezes could be accessed. Doors were oversized for the most part and windows were large and numerous. Even in the interiors attention was placed on providing good air circulation, thus stairways are open and most rooms have more than one entry door. The houses were situated diagonally from one another further insuring a graceful flow visually as well as practically.

Modern plumbing and electricity were still in the future when these houses were built. Cisterns provided water. Little attention was paid to kitchen and bath facilities, although there is some indication that there may have been indoor privies in some of the houses. Bathrooms were added in the 1920's. Warmth was furnished by the centrally located fireplaces around which the main living areas were arranged.

In the 1880's rail service only extended as far as Sag Harbor. All materials used in the building of the Association Houses had to be transported on water and by wagon overland. With seven houses all being erected at about the same time there would have been a great deal of lumber on the site. If one looks closely at the moldings in the houses one sees a different number of beads used in each house. Presumably this was done to facilitate the identification of materials for a specific house, although it has been suggested that the number of beads indicates the order in which the houses were erected.

The seven sister houses were designed with their main entrances facing the Clubhouse, westernmost with east entries, easternmost with west entries. The Walking Tour will begin at the westernmost house and proceed to the easternmost house.

1. The Agnew Cottage

The Agnew Cottage was built for Dr. Cornelius R. Agnew, a prominent ophthalmologist who was known for his work with Civil War veterans. A graduate of Columbia College and the College of Physicians and Surgeons, he also studied in Europe. He was Surgeon General of the State of New York at one time, organized both the Brooklyn and the Manhattan Eye and Ear Hospitals, founded the New York Ophthalmological Society, and established the ophthalmologic clinic at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. He was a well known authority in his field, lecturing and writing and performing many leadership roles.

This house has had many alterations over the years. At one time it was divided into two houses with no entry between them. It is now in the process of being painstakingly restored and renovated by its current owner. On the exterior can be seen some of the original shingles, asbestos shingles which were placed over them later and new shingles which are being hand cut at present. Originally seven different patterns of shingles were used here.

Both the east and west porches were blown off in the hurricane of 1938. Four years ago an electrical fire which started outside the house did extensive damage.

Inside, the floor plan is the same as the Orr Cottage, but reversed. The balustrade and stairs are new, though as close to the original as possible. The single stairway window was probably two narrow ones when the house was built. There are seven fireplaces in the house. The butler's pantry and back staircase are original. The hunt is still on to find the original location of the front door.

2. The Benson Cottage

The cottage which Arthur W. Benson had built for himself was among the smallest and certainly the most rustic of the Association Houses. Born in Maine in 1812, Benson moved to Brooklyn at the age of 16 where he became one of its wealthiest and most respected citizens. Benson's wealth came from the shipping business from which he retired at the age of 37. He was President of the Brooklyn Gas Light Company for 20 years and his name was given to the area known as Bensonhurst.

Benson was an avid sportsman and a particularly enthusiastic striped bass fisherman. He apparently led a somewhat spartan and reclusive life, at least here in Montauk, spending days alone on his boat fishing. Reputed to be a gracious host, he was also known to cook lobster in an iron pot outdoors.

The Benson house has been altered very little and preserved very well, having had only three owners in 110 years. This house, smaller than most of the others, cost between \$11,000 and \$13,000 to construct. The Marsh family bought it from Benson's heirs in the early 1900's for \$2,000 and kept it in the family as a summer residence until 1982. (Central heating was added six years ago.)

The exterior of the house has a tight, well organized design yet carries great charm on its facade. It is similar to the Bell House in Newport, Rhode Island, built at the same time. The pitch of the roof is very interesting and shows a knowledge of Japanese design. The original roof would have been shingled in wood, of course. The original entrance of the house would have been on the east side where the carriage path was located. Note the eyebrow window so favored by H.H. Richardson.

The interior of the house is similar to the one Stanford White built for his friend William Merritt Chase in Shinnecock, Long Island. The entire interior is paneled in yellow pine and fir. An advantage to this is that the house has a lot of give in a hurricane and requires very little

maintenance. The fireplace, as in the other houses, has mortar colored to match the brick and a very narrow flue. Note the unusual placement of the picture molding in the dining room. There are interesting angles all over the house and odd shaped rooms upstairs. The interior east door in the main room has growth measurements marked for Benson's grand-daughter.

3. The Sanger Cottage

The Sanger Cottage was built for businessman Henry Sanger. Occupied by several owners over the years, it was known as Sharon's Inn in the 1960's. It suffered extensive fire damage from a lightning strike in the 1970's. Francis Fleetwood undertook the restoration of this house in 1990-91 for the present owner. Excess dormers and bathrooms were subtracted, porches uncovered, and railings replaced with replicas of the originals.

Note the wonderfully playful shingle design on the south facade and the use of four different window shapes on the north side and again the eyebrow soffit. Here the interior boasts a beautiful large entryway with grand staircase, original balustrades, panelling and fireplace. A comfortable modern kitchen has been added to this house, while the dining room retains its original panelling. The living room has been altered slightly to accommodate the present owner's needs.

4. The Hoyt Cottage

The Hoyt Cottage was built for businessman Alfred M. Hoyt who also later owned other properties in Montauk. The largest of the Association Houses, it was once used as a restaurant called Grandview Manor. Unfortunately is not available to be seen on this tour.

5. The Clubhouse

The Clubhouse was the center of activities for the Association, the first building constructed in the group and the

largest. It could accommodate fifty guests. The members of the group dined there frequently which is why kitchens in the houses were quite minimal. Servants were housed in the Clubhouse. This building was bought by New York attorney Harrison Tweed in 1924. The building was destroyed by fire in 1933 when Tweed's butler went out to burn the garbage. A modern house is now located on the site of the Clubhouse.

6. The Andrews Cottage

The Andrews Cottage was built for writer and bibliophile William L. Andrews, a founder of the Grolier Club. Also greatly altered by previous owners, this house was very carefully renovated and restored for its current owner by Francis Fleetwood in 1992-93. Nearly everything in the house was painted brown in the 1920's, requiring extensive stripping for restoration.

This house commands exceptional views from all the large windows and more light fills the rooms than any of the other houses lending this house a particularly modern feeling. The unusual split level living room has been restored to its original condition except for a missing settee below the elevated platform to the staircase. Note the particularly beautiful oversized doors at both east and west sides of the living room. The small library at the east end of the living room is also original.

A group of small water colors painted by Andrews himself and a portrait of Andrews and his wife hang in what was the location of the original kitchen. The bright and gracious modern kitchen wing with guest quarters below was carefully designed to work with the original plans of the house. The dining room has an added bay window and original fireplace.

Treatment of the exterior is more elaborate than on the other houses with a concentration on detail in the trim. Note the delightfully rendered second story porch in particular.

7. The de Forest Cottage

The de Forest Cottage was built for brothers Robert Weeks de Forest and Henry de Forest of the law firm de Forest Brothers. A native New Yorker who lived in Greenwich Village all his life, Robert de Forest was exceptionally well known for his devotion to the social and cultural concerns of the city. In the words of Mayor Walker at the time of de Forest's death in 1931, "*Mr. de Forest, through his tireless work in the Russell Sage Foundation, the Welfare Council, the State Charities Aid Association and in the advancement of the interests of the Metropolitan Museum, has earned our gratitude and admiration. He was truly a New Yorker... Yet in all his work, so valuable to the people of this community and nation, he remained in the background, modest and self-effacing.*"

The de Forest Cottage has long been considered one of the most, if not the most, beautiful of the Association Houses. Carl Fisher owned this house in the 1920's (as well as the Agnew and Sanger houses) while he was pursuing his own development scheme for Montauk. He made some alterations to the interior in order to accommodate his staff and also built a small garage with servants' quarters nearby. He had slated this house for removal in favor of a Miami style hotel. Fortunately for us the stock market crash intervened and saved this graceful gem.

When the house was restored in 1987 by Ed Pospisil for the current owners, the magnificent veranda, enclosed by a previous owner, was opened to the sea air again. Note the extraordinary fan detail on the ceiling of the round section, (struts were necessarily added during the reconstruction,) as well as the lattice and wheel detail on the west side. Unfortunately, the interior of the home is not available to be seen at this time.

8. The Orr Cottage

Built for merchant and financier Alexander E. Orr, this cottage is the easternmost and the only one with shore frontage connected with it. Born in Ireland, Orr arrived in New York in 1851. He became a partner in the firm David Dows, Co. He was a member of the Produce Exchange, eventually becoming its president for a time. He involved himself in many civic and cultural organizations and was perhaps most known at the time for his work with the Rapid Transit Board, being made its chairman in 1894.

In 1924, attorney Harrison Tweed and a group of like-minded friends bought the Orr House for \$15,000. Affectionately dubbing the house "Tick Hall" and themselves and their families Ticks, Tickesses and Tickettes (see Tweed's wonderful journal of 1924 on display at the library) these men revived the life style of fishing and rustic enjoyment of nature which the original Association members lived.

Mr. Tweed and his family continued to enjoy this house until the late 1960's when it was sold to its present owners. The bell tower over the southwestern corner of the veranda and the anchor on the chimney were added by Tweed's yacht captain, Joe Emmers. The bell tower came from Mrs. Barbara Tweed's family home on Staten Island.

One of the largest houses in the group, the Orr house commands a breathtaking view of the peninsula. Childe Hassam was once impressed enough by it to paint it. (The painting now hangs in the Bienenke Museum.) A rare double entry flanks a stained glass window depicting the tree of life and the four winds and bearing the boldly placed name Wrightmoor.

The interior floor plan is the same as the Agnew House but in reverse. Note in particular the use of moldings throughout. The main room ceiling may have had a mural in it at one time. The extraordinary screen on the staircase was discovered hidden in an opaque wall just four years ago when being redecorated. Stanford White's interest in Moorish patterning surely was at hand here.

Notes



MONTAUK LIBRARY

Established 1980

The new Montauk Library building opened in 1991. The facility includes a Mezzanine reading room with view of the hamlet of Montauk and the Atlantic Ocean. The Mezzanine also contains the Adult fiction collection as well as the Spanish Language collection. Computers for Internet access are located here, as well as the William DePouli reading area.

The Main level of the Library contains the Children's Room, Shakespeare, Biography and Non-Fiction Collections, as well as Large Print, Young Adult and Magazine collections, Circulation Desk, and staff offices.

The Lower Level houses the Suzanne Koch Gosman Room, an AIA award winning room where concerts, recitals, lectures, workshops, Bridge, exercise and various community functions are conducted. The Archival Room containing the history of Montauk in many forms: diaries, scrapbooks, photos, memorabilia, artifacts and historical documents, is available by appointment with our Archivist. Art exhibits are mounted by artists for the community and guests to peruse.

The Association House Tour in 1994 and Carl Fisher Events in 1995 were integral parts of the fundraising drive to complete the Montauk Library. Ongoing donations are welcome to: Montauk Library Special Fund, P.O. Box 700, Montauk, NY 11954.