

## The Little History of Hay Beach

Last year, in 2014, a group of us were encouraged to research the history of Hay Beach for the Hay Beach Property Owners Association. Our researches were edited and supplemented by Kathy Gooding into a strong presentation at the Havens House barn in June and in a booklet, *Then and Now: The History of Hay Beach*. What follows is largely drawn from *Then and Now*, which is still available at the Havens House store.

That owners in Hay Beach form a community was the assumption of the Hay Beach Property Owners Association. And the assumption is now a proven fact, for the Association celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2012. It is almost as old as the first offering of Hay Beach lots.<sup>1</sup> But before the community of owners there had to be the business of subdivision and selling the lots on which our houses stand. In our case, the inception of the development, over the long sixty year history of our community, points to our connection with Sylvester Manor.

The original developers of Hay Beach were all direct descendants of Nathaniel Sylvester (1610-1680), the first lord of the Manor, and also direct descendants of the 11<sup>th</sup> lord of the manor, Eben Norton Horsford (1818-1893). Horsford, Harvard's first Chemistry professor and a successful capitalist, bought back to the Manor the northeast of the Island. He foresaw the value of those lands in light of the growing popularity of summer houses in beautiful surroundings. He had already profited from that trend, selling a 200-acre medallion of the lands to the west to the developers of Manhasset House.<sup>2</sup> His will left the remaining lands in a trust that permitted and seemed to encourage the sales of the property. But the development did not take shape until the 1950's. Only then did the project move forward.

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<sup>1</sup> You should know that the Association is not a product of the Hay Beach developer, making each purchaser automatically a member, and with the power to set and collect charges and to make rules and to enforce them, as is the case in many gated communities and some un-gated ones, such as Silver Beach here on the Island. Instead, it is a voluntary organization, devoted to making us Hay Beachers better known to each other, to giving a forum where we can hear about Island issues and discuss them, and to be the Island's ear and voice to the Island at large.

<sup>2</sup> Manhasset House was a very elegant and successful summer hotel for forty years, after which a disastrous fire and the decline in its profits, led to its abandonment. The original plan was also designed to sell small lots for private houses. The owners of the few existing private houses in the property took over after the Manhasset House owners dropped out of sight. They bought up the whole property and, later, formed it into the Village of Dering Harbor.

When presented, the development plan for Hay Beach seemed so large to the Town Planning Board that the Board requested that, under the aegis of the development plan, separate subdivisions should be submitted for separate Town Board approval. Thus, everyone in Hay Beach lives in one or the other of its subdivisions (plural), and many long-time residents still will speak of Section 10, when they mean Point Lane and of Section 6, when they mean the separate area Hay Beach south of Cobbets Lane. And, of course, of the ill-fated Section 9!

Hay Beach's development moved slowly. The original developers were not professionals, and the burden fell heavily on one of them, on Sylvester Prime, who was, first and foremost, a farmer of many acres north and south of Cobbetts Lane. In 1962 they offered the development for sale on a wholesale basis, and in 1966, a group of investors, led by experienced developers Mel Weill and Henry Kessler, took over. Thereafter, development, year by year, moved forward in a stately way, until today, as we know, all 9 sections are substantially built up.

Before the subdivisions, Hay Beach had very few residents, nor was the area of any great interest to the Island residents well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was thought of as a little-used portion of Dering Farm, which itself was part of the Manor. And always, through 300 years, there were picnics and walks along the beach.

And Hay Beach has played, at several points, a role in the life of the Island. In the time of the Revolutionary War, the wild hay that grew on the relatively flat accretion that created Hay Beach Point attracted British ships. The ships were carrying troops and horses for the invasion of Long Island and New York. Becalmed, they harvested the wild hay and called on the Islanders for more hay and other supplies to be deposited on the Point for pick-up. The event is remembered in the name of the point and of our community.

Hay Beach Point also had a processing plant during the 19<sup>th</sup> century height of the catch and processing of Menhaden –Bunkerfish- into oil and fertilizer. It was a smelly, but profitable business until it interfered with the resort season, and while it prospered, its casual workers had huts along Coecles Harbor, memorialized in a sign at Menhaden Beach that points to Bunker City. Also, since the early 1890's, a large and portion of Hay Beach has been devoted to a golf course<sup>3</sup> under fore-runners of today's

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<sup>3</sup> The boundaries of the golf course property were often shifted around during its long history, but have now settled down. The golf course property was until very recently under lease from the Hay Beach developers, but the Country Club has now purchased full ownership of the property.

Gardiner's Bay Country Club: the history of the golf course can fill a volume by itself. Finally, Horsford tried his own hand at a resort for day-trippers, but soon gave it up. The resort, known as "Dinah's Rock" (believed to be named after the freed slave Diana Williams who lived in the area during the early 1800s) boasted a carousel and picnic facilities and was accessed by steamships from Connecticut. Gone more than a century and a quarter, it has still left its mark in the name of Carousel Lane and, under water, in the still visible stone pilings for its pier.

Look at the map of Shelter Island, and let me describe the way Hay Beach grew. The first subdivision opened was along Dinah Rock Road; the next subdivisions were along Gardiner's Bay Drive and Country Club. Then along Hay Beach Road, Section 6, and then Crescent Way and Great Circle Drive and, last of all, Point Lane. The actual buying and building, of course, has not followed a pattern of filling one subdivision before another is opened. Instead, sales of undeveloped lots in some subdivisions are still occurring.

Shelter Island, and Hay Beach with it, always has been peaceful and secure. Only one time has an issue led to such a near unanimity of opinion among Hay Beachers, so that the Association acted for the whole in opposing approval of a newly proposed subdivision. Section 9 was proposed as a subdivision of 35 acres that run towards the sea along Ram Island Drive and along Gardiner's Bay Drive almost to Menhaden Lane. In 1970, the new developers filed the Section 9 plan with the Town Planning Board.

Within Hay Beach, the adjacent owners of either side of Gardiner's Bay immediately opposed the proposal. But they were not alone. There was opposition in all parts of Hay Beach. That the new section was not part of the original development plan, and that the area often flooded, certainly justified the belief that it would remain undeveloped land or was intended to remain undeveloped land, especially since all residents had a non-exclusive easement for a beach there.<sup>4</sup> Thus began a struggle that, waxing and waning over 22 years, only was finally resolved in 1992 when the County and the Town, with help from the Nature Conservancy, bought out the area for \$1,300,000 and devoted it to 'passive recreation'; and the proposal for Section 9 was abandoned.

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<sup>4</sup> The beach has never been fully developed, but it is in almost all our deeds.

The Association bore a great deal of the burden of the fight, financed in part by owners along Gardiner's Bay Drive who were most directly affected. The fight raged over protection of rare fauna and flora, over the Eastern Prickly Pear Cactus and Piping Plovers. It dwelt on the real threats to the rest of Hay Beach, threats to the purity of its water supply from increased salinity; and, after its designation as an 'Undeveloped Coastal Barrier,' Section 9 was subjected to stricter Federal standards for development. It was opposed before the Town Board and elsewhere as subject to inherent problems of construction and flood protection, of available potable water and of disposition of sewage. The number of proposed lots decreased with each amended proposal before the Town Board. Appeal to the courts, however, twice denied the Board's power to refuse the subdivision completely, stating that that would be an uncompensated 'taking'. The fight to end the proposal for good was joined, despite many disappointments to Hay Beach in the courts and elsewhere, with private and public assistance and support. The help included Shelter Island residents, notably Linda Holmes and others, and throughout the Island, a Section Nine Task Force, the Shelter Island Association and public officials, notably Fred Thiele, then a County legislator. It involved Federal, State, County and Town boards and departments, and, as indicated, it was only ended by public acquisition of the land.

There has never been such another such extended action by the Association as its ultimately successful opposition to Section 9. In the shadow of the Section 9 struggle, there was early opposition to Section 10 (Point Lane), another proposal that was not part of the original development plan. But ultimately the Association backed away from the fight, and Section 10 went forward.

So, dear Readers that is the history of Hay Beach to date, if not in a nutshell, in not much more than a golf ball. Of course, there is much more to our history, and all of you are urged to dig around and find the rest of the story. But, as for Hay Beach itself, many houses are entering into use by a third generation and, in some cases, even a fourth generation of delighted users. The changes over its development are many, and each decade opens a new aspect of Hay Beach. We wish you enjoyment of this brief history.

Bernard Jacob, Hay Beacher since 1988 and several times President of the Hay Beach Property Owners' Association (1991-93, 1997-98).