Admiral Alfred T. Mahan: The Pen That Launched a Thousand Ships

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) was a United States Navy flag officer, strategist, and historian—and without doubt the most influential and historically significant figure to have ever resided in Quogue. His most famous work, The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783, published in 1890, argued that even in an era of land-based colonial expansion, the countries with the greatest naval power would exert worldwide dominance. His strategies were the basis for naval operations in WWI and well into the 20th century. The Mahan family built two homes in Quogue, “Stumberside” in 1894, and “Marshmere” in 1909. Following his death in 1914, his widow, Ellen Lyle Evans Mahan, and his two daughters, Ellen Kuhn Mahan and Helen Evans Mahan, maintained residence at “Marshmere,” until Helen’s death in 1963. Exhibition curated by M. Llewellyn Chapman.

This exhibition was inaugurated at an open house on Sunday, May 25. Curator M. Llewellyn Chapman and Sir Harold Evans, the distinguished journalist and author and long time Quogue resident, spoke about Admiral Mahan to an audience of about 50 people.

There it sits, all by itself, a charming lonesome structure surrounded by reeds, marshes and water on Dune Road. The little house has changed little since it was built ca.1918 as a shelter for the local Game Warden, Mr. Everett Overton of East Quogue. In duck season Mr. Overton patrolled the land around waterways from East Quogue to Quogue, especially along the marshes where ducks were plentiful and so were the poachers. He and his father, a ship’s carpenter, put up a basic structure with a fireplace to provide protection and warmth, his 12-year-old son, Allan, gathered rocks for the chimney. When the Overtons didn’t use it, they rented it out for the summer season.

In the “Roaring 20s” along with the duck hunters, the south shore of Long Island was the destination for runnners with bootleg whiskey from Canada and the Caribbean. Gangsters picked up the boxes of booze and delivered them to speakeasies all over the island and in the city. The Canoe Place Inn at Hampton Bays was a popular spot, as well as Caudillo’s in Greenport which still has the trap door under the bar where boats unloaded their cargo. One boat came up where they were known to carry a lot of cash in their pockets (his place of deposit for the cottage). Roland Bursey, their man of all trades, heard something, got out of bed to investigate, and made his way to the beach where he watched runnners come through the surf carrying boxes of liquor onto the sand. With his shotgun, Bursey held them off until the police arrived. As the police were leaving the beach the bootleggers they saw the man maneuvering himself on the sand and marveled, “HE HAS NO LEGS!” Bursey had lost a leg in WWII and was recuperating in the hospital when Mrs. Holden was a volunteer. She told him he could have a job with Mr. Holden’s architectural firm to deliver plans on a special bike in the city. On the day he was discharged, Bursey hauled a cab, stepped off the curb and was struck by the cab, severing his good leg. The job offer was still open and he worked for the Holdens many years in the city and their summers in Quogue.

It was still the Prohibition Era in the early 1930s, an era we associate with chaos in the social network across the country. But, in 1933, the 21st Amendment repealed the 18th Amendment and everybody including President Franklin D. Roosevelt made a day of it! It was the first and only time that an Amendment has been repealed. A year before the repeal, in 1932, the little house on the canal was the scene of a gruesome murder. Dr. Henry Tuthill, a midwife, was found dead in the house. Her husband, who was around the corner from the cottage, was found dead in the hold of the vertical lift bridge. As the police were leaving the scene, they stopped to look at the cottage. Roland Bursey and his mates broke down the doors with a hammer and then shot him numerous times. The coroner’s report was found days later in his own car a cross Dune Road near Ponquogue Bridge.

In the 1940s, Allan Overton (the young rock collector) tended the bridge in Quogue. His niece, Susan Fox, said that he was an idiosyncratic man, educated through the 8th grade; nevertheless, he was an avid reader and writer. His “crow’s nest” was filled with his reading and writing and covered on top with a tar cover to let it eat to summer.

The Game Warden wanted a garage for the cottage. There is a letter on record from Mr. Henry H. Gardiner, Schenectady, NY, April 23, 1941, to Mr. Everett Overton giving permission to build a garage for the house on what was part of the Gardiners’ meadow property at the time. (The village owns that land today.) Mr. Gardiner wrote, “payment on this lease will be one dollar and a tub of clams or its equivalent, payable yearly in April.” The Overtons built the garage and honored the agreement.

Overtons built the garage and honored the agreement. There it sits, all by itself, a charming little house on the Canal.
Historic District Project

Last year, in cooperation with the Quogue Historical Society, the Steering Committee for Historic Preservation embarked on a project that will result in the long overdue recognition of the extraordinary collection of historic structures located in the Village of Quogue—the creation and listing on the National Register of Historic Places of a Historic District in Quogue. The Steering Committee, in cooperation with the Historical Society, the Mayor of the Village, the Chair of the Village Architectural Review Board, and a number of interested residents of the Village, has undertaken last summer by Historical Society summer intern Caroline Liegey, to identify the structures in the Village that might qualify—by reason of their historical features and architectural integrity—as "contributing" properties in a potential historic district.

The first phase of the project undertaken last summer by Historical Society summer intern Caroline Liegey, was to identify the structures in the Village that might qualify—by reason of their historical features and architectural integrity—as "contributing" properties in a potential historic district. Over the winter, Zach has taken this information to create a Historic Resource Survey, which contains a brief history of the Village and data on approximately 250 potential "contributing" structures located throughout the Village. This document was recently submitted to the New York State Park Office, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and will form the basis for discussion with the State officials of the boundaries of the Historic District. The goal will be to include as many "contributing" structures in the District as possible, without being required by geographic considerations to also include too many "non-contributing" buildings. Therefore, it is likely that some historic structures located outside the center of the Village may not ultimately be included in the Historic District. (A preliminary map circulated late last summer indicated the possibility of two districts in the Village, one on the east and the other centered on the west sections of Quogue Street. A number of residents suggested that a single district encompassing Quogue Street and several other streets on either side of Quogue Street would be more appropriate. The current thinking is that there will be a single district centered on the Quogue Street area.)

Once the boundaries of the district have been determined, a formal application will be submitted to the State for approval. If the application is approved, the State office will then forward the application to the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, and listing on the National Register. We hope that the entire process will be completed within the next several years.

We would like to emphasize that the creation of a Historic District and its listing on the National Register of Historic Places will not require any new regulations or controls. It embraces the Village and its architectural heritage. Restoration of contributing properties to place National Register plaques on the streets in the District and on their homes if they desire to do so. It imposes no restrictions whatsoever on the ability of homeowners to deal with their property as they see fit, although the Steering Committee and the Historical Society certainly hope that the creation and National Register listing of the Historic District will raise awareness in the community of the importance of preserving our historic resources.

We are very grateful to a number of individuals who have contributed significant support to the Historic District project: the Historical Society’s 2013 summer intern, Caroline Liegey; the Historical Society’s archivist Julie Good; Bruce Piciotto who produced on short notice and in unfavorable weather conditions a substantial portfolio of photos of potential contributing properties that are included in the Historic Resource Survey, Zach Staudenroth, and Quogue Village Historian Frankie Ryan who has provided very useful comments on the draft of the Historic Resource Survey.

To the residents of Quogue, we wish to thank the Quogue community for its support and interest in the creation and listing on the National Register of the Historic District. It is critical that this process preserves the significance of the historic resources. The Neighborhood Historic Resource Survey is simply a recognition of the importance of the historic resources.

Our family summered in a small cottage on Dune Road from 1943 until the mid 1970’s (the house has since been pulled down and replaced).

My father and I were standing on the steps of a Quogue Surf Club shortly after sunrise on the morning of the fighter plane crash that you describe (Winter 2013 Newsletter). We were flying a C-47 (we were pressed into the air over the ocean that on that beautiful calm July morning. They were firing on a target set up by one plane, which was a common and interesting sight in the war years.

Suddenly one plane fell and spiraled into the sea. Just before it hit something dark came off it, perhaps the canopy or the pilot. A day or two later boats appeared out there, obviously grappling for the plane. They appeared much too far out and, the weather still bright and calm, my father paddled out in our canvas kayak to tell them that they should be looking further in shore. They ordered him ashore and ignored his advice. Perhaps they would have found the plane had he heeded it. I was twelve years old at the time. The experience has been seared in my mind ever since.

The pilots training at the Westhampton Air Corps base at the time were Brazilians. They liked to frequent Basso’s, where my parents also liked to dine. The South Americans became fast friends of my family. Later, in 1960, we bought the house, she embraced it and the cottage put out a new glow. It was ready for the summer folks.

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The first phase of the project undertaken last summer by Historical Society summer intern Caroline Liegley, was to identify the structures in the Village that might qualify—by reason of their dates of construction, architectural features and architectural integrity—as “contributing” properties in a potential historic district. Over the winter, Zach has taken this data and developed a Historic Resource Survey, which contains a brief history of the Village and data on approximately 250 potential “contributing” structures located throughout the Village. This document was recently submitted to the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and will form the basis for discussion with the State officials of the boundaries of the Historic District. The goal will be to include as many “contributing” structures in the District as possible, without being required by geographic considerations to also include too many “non-contributing” buildings. Therefore, it is likely that some historic structures located outside the center of the Village may not ultimately be included in the Historic District. (A preliminary map circulate late last summer indicated the possibility of two districts in the Village, one on the east and the other centered on the west sections of Quogue Street. A number of residents suggested that a single district encompassing Quogue Street and several other streets on either side of Quogue Street would be more appropriate. The current thinking is that there will be a single district centered on the Quogue Street and Washington Avenue axes.)

Once the boundaries of the district have been determined, a formal application will be submitted to the State for approval. If the application is approved, the State office will then forward the application to the U.S. District Office for review and listing on the National Register. We hope that the entire process will be completed by early next year.

We would like to emphasize that the creation of a Historic District and its listing on the National Register of Historic Places is simply a recognition of the significance of the historic resources of the Village. It entitles the Village and property owners to a number of contributing properties to place National Register plaques on the streets in the District and on their homes if they desire to do so. It imposes no restrictions whatsoever on the ability of homeowners to deal with their property as they see fit, although the Steering Committee and the Historical Society certainly hope that the creation and National Register listing of the Historic District will raise awareness in the community of the importance of preserving our precious historic resources.

We are very grateful to a number of individuals who have contributed significantly to the Historic District project: the Historical Society’s 2013 summer intern, Caroline Liegley, the Historical Society’s archivist Julie Goble, and Zach Studenroth who produced on short notice and in unfavorable weather conditions a beautiful, 475-page final report. The Steering Committee would like to thank the Quogue Community for its support and interest. We look forward to the completion of the steering of this exciting project for the Village.

The Little House

Allan Overton is on the roof with the antenna. The picture is called “Closing a Summer House” and it hung in the Kodak Colorama exhibition in Grand Central Terminal in New York City in 1908. In 2009 the photograph was the centerpiece in Vanity Fair magazine’s “Rethinking the Overton” story.

When Allan Overton’s widow, Betty Fox Overton, died, she left the house to her niece, Susan, and three nephews. The siblings loved the house and reluctantly decided to sell it. So it was in 2010 Anne McMillen heard the cottage was available. She knew her family had purchased the house, embraced it and its all its needs. Anne and her husband, Benno Schmidt, have a wonderful house nestling in the road where they watched the cottage being born again. Dismantling the built-in bench, workers found a cupboard inside. Within a year, floors, walls and windows were renovated, new kitchen appliances, new beds, chairs and a sofa were put in and the cottage put out a new glow. It was ready for the summer folks.

Our family summered in a small cottage on Dune Road from 1943 until the mid-1970’s (the house has since been pulled down and replaced).

Father and I were standing on the porch of my uncle Sunny’s house on the morning of the fighter plane crash that you describe (Winter 2013 Newsletter). We watched a red-tailed hawk fly 475 ft in the air over the ocean that on that beautiful calm July morning they were firing on a target towed by one plane, which was a common and interesting sight in the war years.

Suddenly one plane fell and spiraled into the sea. Just before it hit something dark came off it, perhaps the canopy or the pilot. A day or two later boats appeared out there, obviously grappling for the plane. They appeared much too far out and, the weather still bright and calm, my father paddled out in our canvas kayak to tell them that they should be looking further inshore. They ordered him ashore and ignored his advice. Perhaps they would have found the plane had they heeded it. I was twelve years old at the time. The experience has been forever fastened in my mind ever since.

The pilots training at the Westhampton Air Corps base at the time were Brazilians. They liked to visit my uncle’s beach house. My parents also liked to dine. The South Americans became familiar with Dr. İsmet Basso and they gave her a large framed photograph of them which she proudly hung in the restaurant.

Did You Know?

A Letter from Vermont

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Dartmouth Indians

Azariah Horten, a native of Southold, a graduate of Yale and an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church, came to the Montauk Point area in 1763 as a missionary here and established the first Indian schools at Poosepatuck and Shinnecock, which still exist, and one at Montauk, which lasted until the middle of the 19th century. Upon Horton’s retirement, he recommended as his successor the Indian Samson Occum. Occum was a student at Eleazer Wheelock’s School for Indians at Lebanon, Vermont. When he arrived at Montauk in 1749, age 26, he became a close friend of Samuel Buell, minister of the Southold Presbyterian Church, who helped him become an ordained member of the clergy in 1759. In 1765 Occum was sent to England by the Presbyterian Church on behalf of a movement to establish an American College for Indians. He spent three years in England and on his return had gained a reputation for eloquence and scholarly achievement, he had become one of America’s most important spokesmen of his race. However, the funds he had raised were not used to found an Indian College here on Long Island; they were used to move Dr. Wheelock’s Indian school in Lebanon, CT, to Hanover, NH, where they changed the name of the school to Dartmouth College, and the only concession made to Occum’s demands was that a number of Indians be admitted each year to that school, an agreement that Dartmouth still honors in their modern day cross-cultural portrait hang in the school’s library.

This bit of history is from: The Thirteen Tribes of Long Island, by Paul Buhle. A copy is in the collection of the QHS.

The organization of the Quogue Library Association in 1886. But until construction of the Quogue Library in 1897, books were shelved in Jessup’s general store. His son Billy monitored under the careful eye of his wife, Fannie. Since then, the store changed hands and became a pharmacy, Western Union Office and real estate office (1904), luncheonette (1960), and a succession of businesses since the 1970’s including stationery store, food store and cafe. George Jessup’s store has served Quogue village for nearly a century and a half. It is a landmark in the truest sense of the word. This icon is being considered for development and reconstruction. It is critical that this process preserves the architectural integrity of this historic structure.
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In the “Roaring 20’s” along with the duck hunters, the south shore of Long Island was the destination for rumrunners with bootleg whiskey from Canada and the Caribbean. Gangsters picked up the boxes of booze and delivered them to speakeasies all over the island and in the city. The Canoe Place Inn in Hampton Bays was a popular spot, as well as Caudio’s in Greenport which still has the trap door that he and his father built to load their cargo. One boat came up where the Richmond Holde was built ca. 1918 as a shelter for the poachers. He and his father, a ship’s carpenter, put up a basic structure with a fireplace to provide protection and warmth, his 12-year-old son, Allan, gathered rocks for the chimney. When the Overtons didn’t use it, they rented it out for the summer season.

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