

## WILLIAM J. MATHESON---- VILLAGE FOUNDER AND VISIONARY

By Walter D. Kolos

One of the earliest and most influential residents of this Village was William J. Matheson. An accomplished scientist, industrialist, philanthropist and generous citizen, Matheson was a very important figure in the community and the early days of the Village.

Born in 1856 in Elkhorn, Wisconsin, Matheson grew up in a comfortable, midwestern and Victorian environment. Curiously, very little is known about his early life. He attended St. Andrew's University in Scotland, where his lifetime fascination with chemistry was developed. After his education abroad, he would become a part of a new industrial class—that of businessman chemist. His first position was that of an American agent for the German chemical firm of Leopold Cassella, a firm which pioneered the synthetic aniline dye process.

Matheson was keenly aware of the need for artificial pigments for textiles, paints and ceramics. During the mid-nineteenth century, France and Germany excelled in this revolutionary industry. Up until this time, the world depended upon vegetable and other forms of natural dyes—indigo (blues-reds), annatto (bright orange), cochineal (purples), Brazilwood (crimson), and so on. After the German defeat in World War I, Matheson became the president and chairman of the board of Cassella's American agency---which had a new name—National Aniline and Chemical Company.

The new American industry was very successful, so that in three years Matheson expanded the company through several mergers and acquisitions. This phenomenal growth transformed the business into one of the giants of chemicals and synthetics: the Allied Chemical and Dye Corporation.

In 1900, William Matheson purchased the Fort Hill Estate on Lloyd's Neck, which had recently been acquired from Queens County, and was now part of Suffolk. The manor house, built by Anne Coleman Alden (designed by

McKim, Meade and White), occupied the site of Fort Franklin, a British fortress during the Revolution. Over the years, Matheson would increase his holdings to 330 acres. Vast tracts of land and buildings, including the Joseph Lloyd Manor, would be included in his estate property. His domain encompassed a mile long frontage on Cold Spring Harbor, the causeway, the causeway meadow, the beach to the south (Bath Club), and a half mile of frontage on Lloyd Harbor.

Matheson not only increased the size of the main house, but greatly improved upon the acreage. Orchards, a formal garden, and vast grazing pastures were established. Sweeping lawns and scientifically rotated farmlands were dutifully tended. He scoured the world looking for exotic plants that would compliment his property. Stables, carriage houses and staff quarters were built in traditional styles, using modern construction techniques. Fort Hill appeared to be a venerable, time worn English country home, when in reality it was the modern establishment of a scientist-industrialist.

Matheson's belief in science went far beyond the constraints of industry. According to an account in *Tales of Old Lloyd Harbor*, he was worried about the malaria outbreaks which were occurring on the north shore of Long Island. Around 1900, he consulted the small biological laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor about the eradication of the mosquito borne disease. The lab helped him immensely. Matheson was fascinated by the work being done at the facility concerning microbes and salt water life. He became a major benefactor and eventually became its president and governing board chairman, 1905-1923.

Although usually referred to as a peninsula, Lloyd Neck is really an island connected by a tidal marsh. A sandy road, usually impassable at high tide, ran through the marsh. For centuries, travel and industry on the Neck was accomplished by boat and barge. The Lloyd family had their famous steam ship dock at Columbia Grove on the southwest corner of the Neck. Building supplies and full sized trees were barged in to create Marshall Field's "Caumsett." The shoreline had several docks, remnants of which can be seen today.

Matheson was concerned about the lack of reliable road access to Lloyd Neck, especially in the age of the modern automobile. He owned both the causeway and surrounding marshland, and decided to make a permanent elevated roadway to connect the Neck to the mainland. The problem confronting him was the incredible cost of building materials and construction. He felt it would be too much of a private expense for the improvement of a public road.

In 1929, major subway tunnel excavations were being carried out in Manhattan. A tremendous amount of bedrock was accumulating from the dig. Matheson approached city officials concerning the problem of excavation rubble. He needed the rock for his causeway, and they needed to get rid of it. A cordial agreement was forged—Matheson could have all the rock he wanted, as long as it could be taken away from the city.

Barges, low in the water with rock, arrived off the coast of Lloyd Neck. Barge mounted cranes lowered the rock onto the old roadway with their nimble claws, elevating the causeway to its current height. When finished, the construction would be topped with a modern concrete roadbed. The causeway road traveled north and through the center of Matheson's Tudor style gate house, where it continued to hug the shoreline to Fort Hill Beach, and then uphill to the main house. At the gate house, there was an eastward spur, which became Lloyd Harbor Road.

Ironically, Matheson would die of a heart attack the year after building his causeway, in 1930. An accomplished sailor, who had sailed around the world, Matheson died peacefully while sailing his own yacht, the *Seaforth*.

The dynamism of his legacy would be carried out by his daughter, Anna Matheson Wood. She inherited Fort Hill, and maintained it beautifully into the 1970's as one of the last working estates on the North Shore. The Matheson Meadow, which occupies 38 acres of the estate, was given to the Nature Conservancy by "Nan" Wood in memory of her father in 1969.