

THE ORIGINS OF THE FORT HILL BEACH ASSOCIATION

The Fort Hill Beach Association owes its existence to the generosity of Anna Matheson Wood (1881-1980). Her father, William John Matheson, founder of Allied Chemical, bought the Fort Hill Estate in 1900. By that time, Lloyd Neck had been out of the hands of the Lloyd Family for more than a quarter of a century, and the North Shore communities which touched the waters of Oyster Bay and Cold Spring Harbor had become fashionable as summer retreats for wealthy urbanites.

Matheson bought Fort Hill from the estate of Anne Coleman Alden. Mrs. Alden had built a summer house on the site of the British Fort Franklin on the bluff overlooking Cold Spring Harbor in 1878, calling it Fort Hill. In the 1880's she enlarged her holdings to include the upland meadows (now the Nature Conservancy fields) and 215 additional acres attached to the Joseph Lloyd Manor House, as well as the farm house across Lloyd Lane (now the Nordman residence) and the Lloyd's Dock which jutted out into Cold Spring Harbor at the northern end of the causeway. In all, the southwest corner of Lloyd Neck purchased by Matheson came to almost 330 acres, with close to a mile of waterfront on Cold Spring Harbor (including the causeway and the beach to the south) and a half mile of waterfront on Lloyd Harbor.

In the 1880's the most popular way to travel to Lloyd Neck from New York City was by steamboat, a two-hour ride. The Dock (rebuilt by Mrs. Alden in 1885) was 200 feet long, extending out to 18 feet of water at low tide--deep enough to accomodate the steamboat from New York City to Oyster Bay and Cold Spring. By 1900, when Nan Wood's father bought Fort Hill, the railroad had been extended beyond Hicksville to both Huntington and to Oyster Bay, and the steamboat stopped at Lloyd's Dock only three times a week. Mr. Matheson and his family found it more convenient to take the train from New York to Oyster Bay and then a launch to the Dock.

After purchasing the property, Mr. Matheson set about to turn it from a summer residence into a gentleman farmer's self-sufficient estate. A new red brick house was built over Mrs. Alden's wooden one (the original roof is still visible inside the attic of Fort Hill). Some of the earthen ramparts which were part of the original fort and were saved by Mrs. Alden, were left intact, forming an inner courtyard. Along Lloyd Lane, the wooden barns and stables were replaced by (fire-resistant) reinforced concrete structures, to shelter a dairy herd, horses and ponies. The open meadows provided hay and pasturage. Two stone "ha-ha" fences, rare in the U.S. but common in Britain, were built to confine grazing sheep and yet give the illusion from the main house that they were grazing

on the front lawn. (The wool from the sheep was sent to Vermont to be spun and woven into blankets used on the estate.) To the east of Fort Hill House, a formal sunken garden was installed with the help of Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed Central Park. And adjacent to the formal garden, between it and the apple orchard, five greenhouses were built, some of them steam-heated to make it possible to grow fruits, vegetables, and flowers year-round.

Other buildings followed: A carriage house with quarters for visiting chauffeurs (the McFie and Potts residences) was designed by the architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White. The Alsop house (the "Lawn Cottage") was originally built as living quarters for several employee families. What is now the residence of the Giblins, #10 Lloyd Lane, was originally a four-family house for workers on the Matheson estate.

Until the hurricane of 1938, the entrance to Fort Hill was a one-way drive which began at the Gate Lodge (now the residence of the Krusos), passing through it and hugging the base of the bluff, curving inland past the boat basin to join what is now the beach hill road. It continued up the hill and then bore sharply to the left, to the house. The current Fort Hill Drive was originally a one-way exit from Fort Hill to Lloyd Harbor Road. After the hurricane, the stretch along the water at the base of the bluff, heavily damaged by the storm, was abandoned and what is now Fort Hill Drive became a two-way road.

Anna Matheson Wood, after her marriage to Willis D. Wood in 1905, modernized the Joseph Lloyd Manor House, installing modern plumbing, electrical and central heating systems. She also added a porch and enclosed garden on the west side, a servants' wing on the north, and had garages built with two more apartments overhead for workers' families.

Nan and Willis Wood lived with their three children in the Manor House until after her father died. In 1930 they moved to Fort Hill and began to lease the Manor House to various tenants. They soon realized that increased costs made it impractical to run the estate as her father had, and they began to rent the other houses to friends for summer vacations.

To a great extent, Nan regarded her tenants as her guests. Nan and Willis invited all tenants for the summer to come to Fort Hill "after church" on Easter Day for an Easter egg hunt for the children and to share an Easter punch. On July 4th, everyone was invited to watch the fireworks displays over Oyster Bay and Cold Spring Harbor from Fort Hill. On her birthday on August 2, everyone was invited to Fort Hill at 6:30 p.m. for cake and a group picture. Also in August, an all-family

round-robin mixed doubles tennis tournament began, which culminated in the finals on Labor Day weekend, complete with an engraved silver cup which was passed down, from one year to the next.

The summer rentals ended on Columbus Day, when the water in the rented houses was turned off. For those who were year-round residents in Lloyd Harbor, the community-wide social events continued until Christmas: On Election Day in November, Willis held an open house all day for everyone in the election District, not just for personal friends. (One was expected, however, to attend after voting.) On Halloween, Nan ("Aunt Nan" to those who knew her) dressed up as a witch, gave a "Fort Hill" (paper) mini-pumpkin to each child and served cocoa to the trick-or-treating youngsters and their parents. At Christmas, Nan and Willis came out from New York City to host a caroling party for the Lloyd Harbor community and to light the decorated outdoor tree, so large that it was visible from Center Island and Oyster Bay. From Christmas until Easter, the Woods were not in residence at Fort Hill but spent the winter at Key Biscayne, Florida, returning to Lloyd Neck Easter Week.

Nan Wood's tenants at Fort Hill were her extended family. Not only were they invited to use the beach, bath house, and tennis court, they were also given produce and flowers from the gardens and greenhouses. Their children learned to ride using the ponies and horses in the stables, and had free run of the entire estate, climbing on the ancient weeping beech in front of the East Wing, playing ball on her lawn, riding bikes on the roads, and hiking on the bridle paths. (One of those bridle paths became Seaforth Lane; another became Count Rumford Lane.) And when the children grew up, some asked and received permission to have their weddings in the garden.

Eventually, some of Nan Wood's summer tenants asked to buy land to build residences of their own or convert existing structures. With increased economic pressures (the cost of running her estate together with increased income and property taxes), Nan relented. In a gesture that was both magnanimous and to her economic advantage, she had already given away the beach frontage south of the causeway, creating a new entity, the Bath Club. Thus, when her own Fort Hill Beach became crowded again, this time with guests, tenants, and property owners who had bought land from her, it really surprised no one when, in 1959, she carved out a separate beach from her waterfront and gave it to the property owners. The beach lay just to the north of Fort Hill, and Nan named it "Seaforth Beach," after her father's yacht. The Seaforth Beach Association was incorporated, drew up its By-Laws, and elected its Directors. But the Seaforth Beach never really became the place to congregate and by 1970

the numbers of new owners were growing, as were their families. Owners as well as tenants continued to use Nan's beach, the Fort Hill Beach.

Again, combining financial acumen and her generous impulses, Nan Wood offered to "trade" beaches with the Association: she would relinquish a more valuable (and heavily taxed) piece for one that was smaller, and the Association would acquire the beach with the bath house, tennis court, and the boat house. The latter was crucial; since it had been converted from a storage building for boats to a (rentable) summer residence, income from it would help the new Fort Hill Beach Association defray the costs of maintaining the beach, bath house and tennis court. With that exchange of property, the Seaforth Beach Association became the Fort Hill Beach Association in January, 1970.

Nan Wood died in 1981. If there is a legacy that the founding members of the Fort Hill Beach Association, who knew Nan Wood, would like to pass on to its newest members, it is this: the good life is never fully enjoyed in splendid isolation; rather, it is savored when neighbors are friends and friends are neighborly, sharing places held in common with mutual respect and good humor, taking pleasure in one another's company.

Anne H. Wingate
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(updated: May, 1993)

Sources: Mrs. Natalie Potts, 37 Fort Hill Drive.
Kenneth Scott and Susan E. Klaffky, A History of the Joseph Lloyd Manor House (Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, 1976).
An Historical Sketch of Fort Hill, Lloyd Neck, Long Island (privately published; no author or date).