

Long Island Traditions

NEWSLETTER

www.longislandtraditions.org

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Editor's Note: After several years working in area middle schools, Long Island Traditions is set to release its publication: Long Island Traditional Architecture: A Teacher Resource Guide this spring. In answer to the frequent question, why does traditional architecture matter, we hereby reprint the introduction to this book. For order information, call us at (516) 767-8803. The publication is made possible by the following: Naitonal Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the the Gilder Foundation, and the Huntington and Comsewogue School Districts.

Understanding Traditional and Vernacular Architecture

By Nancy Solomon

Traveling around Long Island, we often recognize historic sites of notable residents, original settlers, or unique cultural historic sites, whether it is Theodore Roosevelt's Sagamore Hill, the Joseph Lloyd manor in Lloyd Harbor, Josiah Martin's "Rock Hall" mansion in Lawrence, or the Stanford White designed Garden City Hotel. Yet throughout Long Island there are also sites that reflect the lives of ordinary residents, ranging from modest farmhouses and barns, workplaces, mills and other structures that reflected the needs of daily life, based on building traditions that had been passed down from generation to generation. Early settlers used building traditions they learned within their families and from their neighbors, in order to present to the outside world an image that reflected their culture, the time spent forming and "perfecting" the ideal home and the community's expectations of what constituted a "proper" home or other building.

Traditional or vernacular architecture is a way of designing and building that involves negotiation
See **Architecture** on page 2

Boating with the Baymen Sailing the Great South Bay

As a result of our popular tour last fall, we invite you to join us again for our "Boating with the Baymen Tour" as we explore the environment, history and culture of Great South Bay. This year's 3-hour tour will take place on Saturday, June 10th, on board the Lauren Kristy, departing from the Bayshore Marina at 2pm.

The Great South Bay supports commercial fishermen who harvest killies, crabs and clams for their livelihoods. Local baymen have learned their trades from traditions that have been passed down within their families since the 1800s. Joining us will be baymen George Rigby Sr. & Jr, John Buczak, bay house owner Lesley Kane and environmental planner Jeff Kassner.

Folklorist Nancy Solomon has been documenting the baymen in this rich maritime community, conducting numerous interviews with area baymen and bay house owners. Since 1987 the area has undergone significant environmental changes, leading many baymen to abandon this traditional way of life. Our goal on this tour is to better understand the relationship between the local ecological system and the baymen who work these waters. In addition we will hear from local Town of Islip bay house owners how the wetlands environment has changed during the past 30 years.

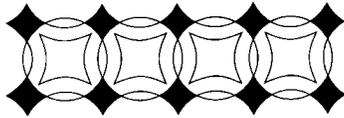
Onboard ferry guests will meet and talk with John Buczak, one of approximately 15 full-time commercial bayman in western Suffolk County. When he is not catching crabs and eels, he makes several kinds of traditional traps including eel traps, killey traps and winkel pots. John is a storyteller whose

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Photo by Nancy Solomon 1999



John Buczak will be among the guest presenters in our 2006 "Boating with the Baymen" tour.



Long Island Traditions Inc.

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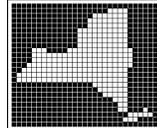
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For more information call: (516) 767-8803, fax: (516) 767-8805, write to us at: 382 Main St., Port Washington, NY 11050, E-mail: litrad@i-2000.com or visit us on the web at: www.longislandtraditions.org

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between three parties: the builder, the client or resident, and the passerby. The result of this negotiation is a form and way of building that has been passed down from generation to generation. Most buildings constructed before the mid-19th century were built by master carpenters and joiners who learned these skills within their families and communities, and had direct personal relationships with the intended occupant. Their works strongly reflected traditions and available technology that changed over time as more people settled in various regions around the United States. Often these conversations resulted in varied house types that changed from one region to another, as each cultural group, defined by ethnicity, religion, occupation or political belief system established their own communities.

Traditional and vernacular architecture was the most common form of architecture built on Long Island and the United States. Examples include Cape Cod saltbox houses like the "Home Sweet Home" house in East Hampton or the English style Suydam house in Centerport, homes that were based on traditional designs common in England using local materials. In the 20th century we need look no further than Levittown, a modern adaptation of the traditional saltbox, or the south shore bungalows and bay houses, modest frame houses based on a popular conception of summer villas, to understand how popular notions of architecture gain acceptance within a community. While there are numerous examples of professional architect designed sites such as government and bank buildings today, most houses and commercial structures followed the popular styles of the time, built by local carpenters from locally available materials. They freely chose designs and features based on the expectations of their clients, as well as the houses that came before them. Like professional architects, traditional and vernacular builders understood that their creations would be judged by the community and their clients; as a result new designs were often conservative, taking few risks in outward appearance.

Vernacular architecture is usually, directly connected with the available materials in the region; it was extremely expensive to import materials, prior to the construction of railroads. As industrialization progressed in the United States, builders could find materials from other regions and abroad, incorporating them into traditional design forms. On Long Island the most common local materials were trees

Photo by Steve Gravano, 1995



The Joeckel bay house is among the oldest bay houses in the Town of Islip.

of various species, ranging from oak and pine to locust and maple trees. In addition there were clay deposits that led to a small brick industry in such communities as Huntington and Stony Brook. As a result of these natural resources, settlers constructed houses and other buildings similar to those of their European homelands, which had similar resources.

Photo by Nancy Solomon 2001



The Oysterponds Historical Society in Orient has a traditional English-style cottage.

Builders used forms and plans that they were either familiar with, those learned within their families, and those found in their communities. On Long Island, as elsewhere in colonial America, builders incorporated traditions and practices of other groups, reaching for the best design and materials that would satisfy their housing and working needs, yet changing as new materials and concepts became available. In the 19th century several builders published “pattern books” which had specific design concepts and floor plans, along with decorative details. By the mid-19th century small industrialists shipped bricks and other building materials to New York and other cities. As a result the area’s vernacular architecture began to slowly shift from traditional concepts to more popular images, often blending the two depending on the communities’ tolerance for change. This transition could take decades in the 19th century, as local residents tended to be conservative in their views of what constituted a proper house or barn.

Traditional houses and barns, along with commercial buildings reflected class, ethnic and regional identity. Floor plans and room arrangement were determined by a number of factors; in houses built by the occupants the size and placement of rooms was based on personal needs, economic circumstances, and individual preferences; in pattern book houses the plans were typically determined by cost and how easy it could be duplicated in different regions. Floor plans were frequently changed to suit the residents’ desires. Yet traditional designs are repeated based on their acceptance within a particular community, and then slowly refined as more choices became available. Architectural change was gradual, reflecting the conservative views most residents hold towards their communities. As architectural historians Tom Carter and Elizabeth Cromley wrote in Invitation to Vernacular Architecture “vernacular designers go about making design decisions by working from a commonly understood and shared view of forms and materials that have been tested in a specific community over generations, in contrast to professional architects, for whom originality is an important concern.”

In order to understand traditional and vernacular architecture, researchers focus on a building over its entire history, rather than a specific period. In this way we can understand how social and economic factors, along with technological changes, affected a

building’s design and construction. For instance, at the Walt Whitman birthplace in Huntington, the Whitman family made a series of additions and removals that greatly changed the original appearance of the homestead and outbuildings. The site we see today is very different than the one found in the mid-19th or mid-20th century. The slave cabin at the Caleb Smith homestead, one of the last remaining slave structures on Long Island, was removed in the mid-late 20th century, a significant loss for Long Island. Researchers learn about these changes through architectural analysis and historical research in primary sources and oral interviews where residents are available.

There are numerous traditional and vernacular architecture types on Long Island. They include:

- Farms and barns
- Commercial buildings including general stores
- Places of worship
- Domestic houses
- Grist mills and wind mills
- Sacred grounds and cemeteries

However these sites are rare due to the passage of time, fires and natural disasters, and the desire to replace the old with the new. In addition there are examples which are no longer standing, ranging from Native American houses and barns to slave cabins. Rather than ignore this group we have relied on historical photographs and other primary sources to help students and teachers learn about their design and construction. In doing so, we hope to end the trend among scholars in ignoring these important architectural traditions. ■

Boating with the Baymen

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tales envelop stories about his bay house and duck hunting adventures. George Rigby, Jr. grew up in Islip, learning the traditions of baymen from his father George. They will share their first hand experience as clammers, eel harvesters, duck hunters and decoy carvers, and commercial fisherman. Lesley Kane is a bay house owner in the Town of Islip. The bay houses near Captree State Park were originally built by local fishermen and baymen in the late 1800s, a tradition that has been maintained through several generations of town residents. Jeff Kassner, environmental projects manager for Cashin Associates and former director of the Town of Brookhaven’s Department of Environmental Protection, has conducted extensive research on the ecological and environmental history of Great South Bay. He is the author of numerous shellfish and historical studies of the bay including “The Baymen of the Great South Bay, New York: a preliminary profile” and “Enhancing New York’s Great South Bay hard clam.”

Please note that the rain date is September 9. To reserve your spot send in the enclosed reservation form or call us at (516) 767-8803. Tickets are \$40/person, \$20 for children under 16 and a \$5 discount for Long Island Traditions members. ■

South Bay Boat Yard Reprieve?

At a standing room only public hearing in the Village of Patchogue, dozens of baymen, wooden boat owners, local residents and students of history requested that the Village review and deny an application by historic boat yard owner Arthur Volkmann to remove the yard's historic marine railway and permit him to bulkhead the site in order to construct a marina, ending a century-old boat yard. On March 13th the Village board voted to reserve a decision on the application until it could consider other means to preserving the site and use. Built in c. 1892 by George Bishop, the yard is well known for its expertise in repairing and restoring historic wooden boats, under the guidance of master boat builder Charlie Balsamo. During the coming weeks and months Long Island Traditions will continue its documentation of this historic site, through architectural and site drawings, historical research and environmental analysis, in order to provide alternate scenarios for the Village's consideration. For more information call Long Island Traditions at (516) 767-8803 or the Village of Patchogue at (631) 475-4300. ■

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EVENTS OF INTEREST

PLEASE NOTE: If you have a Long Island concert or program that focuses on some aspect of traditional culture, drop us a line and we'll put it in our "Events of Interest" column. The deadline is the 1st of June, September, December and March.

- May 1 - 7** Old World Jewish Wedding. A week-long recreation of an Eastern European Jewish wedding with nightly workshops and wedding ceremony on May 7. Featuring Kapelye with historian and world-renowned dance instructor Steve Weintraub. Midway Jewish Center, Syosset. For information call (516) 938-8390.
- May 20** Mulvihill-Lynch School 8th Annual Feis. 9am - 5pm, SUNY at Stony Brook, Student Activities Center, Admission: \$10.00 per person. For more information: Phone 631-738-1242. E-mail Debweb1242@aol.com or www.mulvihill-lynchschool.com.
- June 4** The Ultimate Klezmer Festival, Dix Hills Jewish Center. Featuring Kapelye and special guests plus the Yiddish Dance Workshop and Dance Party with Steve Weintraub. Tickets: \$25. Call: (631) 499-6644.
- June 10** Boating with the Baymen- Leave from Bay Shore Marina and tour aboard the Lauren Kristy, 2 - 5pm. See accompanying article. Tickets are \$40/person, \$20 for children under 16, \$5 discount for Long Island Traditions members. For information call (516) 767-8803.
- June 14-17** Vernacular Architecture Forum annual meeting & tours. New York City. For more information visit www.vernaculararchitectureforum.org. Costs range from \$125/day to \$375 for total conference.

Long Island Traditions
382 Main Street
Port Washington, NY 11050