

# Long Island Traditions

## NEWSLETTER

[www.longislandtraditions.org](http://www.longislandtraditions.org)

Vol. 15 No. 1 Winter 2008

### Welcome George Wallace to Board of Directors

Joining the Long Island Traditions board of directors is esteemed poet, writer, historian and journalist George Wallace of Northport. George Wallace is a freelance journalist and poet who has been writing articles about local history on Long Island on a weekly basis since 1995 for the Long Islander newspaper and Northport Journal. He has had local history articles published in Long Island Forum, Long Island Pulse, Newsday and dozens of other news publications.

A former Peace Corps volunteer and graduate of Syracuse University, UNC-Chapel Hill and Pacific University, he has served as curator of the Northport Historical Society, Village Historian for Northport, and as Suffolk County Poet Laureate. He is author of fourteen chapbooks of poetry, editor of Poetrybay.com and Poetryvlog.com, and travels internationally to conduct writing workshops and give readings. We welcome George to Long Island Traditions. ■

### Water: H<sub>2</sub>O = Life Exhibition and Program

The Museum of Natural History in New York City is hosting an exhibition that explores the global relationship of water environments – to the human environment. According to the exhibit's introduction "Water unites us. Every language has a word for water; no living thing exists without water. It soothes the spirit and

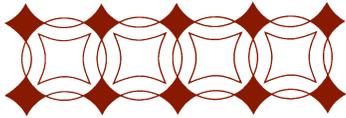


The Great South Bay

sustains the body; its beauty inspires art and music. Employed by cultures around the world in rituals and ceremonies, water bathes us from birth to death. Water is essential to life as we know it. And as it cycles from the air to the land to the sea and back again, water shapes our planet—and nearly every aspect of our lives." In order to explore the local environment, Long Island Traditions is hosting a day long program that examines the Great South Bay and how it has changed in the past 20 years, since the "brown tide" struck the South Shore Estuary. On Saturday, January 12<sup>th</sup> come join us for a lecture-demonstration program on maritime culture with local baymen Flo Sharkey, Bill Hamilton and John Buczak. The afternoon program begins at 1 pm with informal discussions with the baymen, followed at 3 pm with a discussion on how water quality has changed the baymen's way of life for these tradition bearers. For information and tickets call (212) 769-5200. This is a very popular exhibit so we strongly encourage you to purchase your tickets in advance. ■

### The Big Read

Long Island Traditions has received a National Endowment for the Arts "Big Read" grant to support school-based and community based programs centered on "To Kill a Mockingbird." A series of school residencies with civil rights activist Joseph McNeil and Peruvian composer Theo Torres will take place at Freeport High School in May along with film screenings, discussions on prejudice and discrimination on Long Island, and walking tours profiling the Civil Rights movement in Freeport at the Freeport Memorial library. The goal of this program is to increase literacy among adults and students alike, by examining classic works of literature with important themes that are relevant today. Long Island Traditions is one of two organizations in New York City and Long Island to be selected for the program. Assisting in the program will be Freeport Memorial Library director Dave Opatow, and Pamela Maltese and Carol Gilliam of the Freeport School District. The community based programs are free and open to the public. ■



## Long Island Traditions Inc.

Dedicated to the documentation and preservation of Long Island's living cultural heritage.

**Executive Director:** Nancy Solomon

**Board of Directors:** Dorothy Jacobs, Mirna Cortez-Obers, Ken Maltz, Ken Robinson, Linda Scholl, Michael Scully, George Wallace & Wayne Wink

**Advisory Board:** Paul Bentel, John Eilertsen, Dave Opatow, John Pulis & Jean Ritchie

**Newsletter Designer:** Barbara Koelbel Bange

LI Traditions is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization registered with the NY State Board of Charities.

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](mailto:litrad@i-2000.com) or visit us on the web at: [www.longislandtraditions.org](http://www.longislandtraditions.org)

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## January 24: Maritime Folk Art Decorations

On Thursday, January 24<sup>th</sup> join us at the East Meadow Library for an afternoon program exploring traditional maritime folk art with master folk artists Harry Saarinen,

Kenny Swaine and Herb Jurist, who make inspiring decorations using clam shells and other shellfish found on Long Island beaches. Saarinen also makes wondrous steel fish, a trade he learned as a professional welder. The free program takes place at 12:30 pm. For more information call (516) 794-2570.



■ Kenny Swaine

## Charlie Balsamo Named Steward of the Estuary

In September wooden boat builder and master restorer Charlie Balsamo of the South Bay Boat Repair in Patchogue was named the South Shore Estuary's Steward of the Estuary for 2007. Charlie Balsamo has been the boat yard operator at South Bay Boat Repair in Patchogue since 1958. The boatyard was originally founded in 1892 by George Bishop. Balsamo has overseen the construction and maintenance of hundreds of wooden boats, ranging from traditional wooden garveys used by local baymen, to luxury yachts and cruisers. Balsamo is one of the last remaining master wooden boat specialists on Long Island, a trade he began as young teenager in his hometown of Gibraltar, Spain. Since 1958 he has mentored dozens of boat owners on how to properly maintain their craft, including local baymen and recreational fishermen. Balsamo expertly guides his customers in proper procedures in maintaining their historic craft. Balsamo is also a resource for the Coast Guard and ferry operators in the region. Charlie is also a teacher and mentor to teenagers who routinely assist him in caring for his customers, so that he can pass on a traditional maritime skill and keep this group "off the streets."

Sadly, the historic rails that were used to haul the boats into Charlie's boatyard were removed by the property owner in October. As a result the future of the yard is in doubt. We hope you will voice your concern over the yard's fate to the Village of Patchogue. For more information call us at (516) 767-8803.

## Advocacy Update

In the past few months Long Island Traditions has been speaking out on behalf of local traditions that are endangered. Examples include attending NYS Marine Resource Advisory Committee meetings, which regulates commercial and recreational fishermen, encouraging the South Shore Estuary Council and the NYS Ecosystem Management Council to preserve traditional maritime culture as it develops an ecosystem management project in Great South Bay, and joining recreational and commercial fishermen in protesting President Bush's executive order declaring striped bass as a game fish. You can join in these efforts, and support the preservation of local traditional culture, by calling us. In addition we ask that you contact your local assemblyperson and senator to support continued funding for the NY State Council on the Arts, which helps support Long Island Traditions.

## Become a Member Subscribe to the Newsletter!

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## Places of Worship, part 2

By Nancy Solomon

*In the fall 2007 newsletter issue we talked about the design and construction of English churches on Long Island. In this issue we will examine how other denominations built their houses of worship. For more information on Long Island traditional architecture, visit your library or our web site and ask for Long Island Traditional Architecture: A Teacher Resource Guide 1600-1870.*

There are a small number of historic Dutch churches on Long Island, including the Brookville Reformed Church in Brookville and the Gospel Community Church in West Sayville. The Quakers constructed several Friends Meeting Houses on Long Island during the 1700 and 1800's including ones in Manhasset, Jericho and Westbury. The earliest known African American churches were A.M.E. churches. Native Americans originally prayed and worshipped in natural settings, believing that the earth is sacred. Later generations built churches in the styles of their European and African neighbors.

After the Civil War a growing movement among Methodists found its way to Long Island. The Methodist camp meeting movement was established in Sea Cliff, Shelter Island Heights and other communities in the region, with local members building elaborate Victorian style houses and sanctuaries that remain today. Like the Methodist camp houses, many churches added stained glass windows, along with other modern improvements. There was a tremendous increase in population, resulting in new construction of larger churches or expansion of existing churches. As a result of these changes it is sometimes difficult to identify original structures from the pre-Civil War period.

### Quaker Meeting Houses

The Quakers constructed several Friends Meeting Houses on Long Island during the 1700 and 1800's including ones in Manhasset, Jericho and Westbury. According to the New York Landmarks Conservancy, "the typical Quaker meetinghouse is a two-story wood-frame building with two separate entrances on the principal facade, a large first floor meeting space with benches, and an interior second-story gallery." One example is the Westbury meeting house. It is notable for its lack of overt ornamentation. Like a typical English farmhouse, it has an eave front entrance with a steeply pitched gable roof that was similar to those used in "Cape Cod" saltbox houses. It is sheathed in clapboards, with a symmetrical façade that includes two entrances, each flanked by two windows. The interior is completely open without divisions, a feature found in traditional Quaker meeting houses. The Westbury Friends Meeting house was originally built c. 1702, rebuilt a hundred years later in 1802, and rebuilt again in 1902 after a disastrous fire. Despite the newer technologies available, the members decided to reconstruct the original features of the meeting house. According to their monthly meeting notes, shortly after the 1902 fire took place:

*"The committee appointed to consider the matter of re-building the meeting house at Westbury submit the following report. We are united in recommending that the house be rebuilt in size about 30 x 46 at a cost of about \$2500.00. The building to be in general design similar to the old house."*<sup>1</sup>

This position demonstrates their commitment to the traditional design plan and features. Several researchers have documented the Quakers' abolitionist sentiments, leading them to speculate that the house may have been used as a stop on the Underground Railroad during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. However no definitive documentation exists to confirm or deny this theory.

### African American Churches

Beginning in the 1700s, African American freedmen worshipped in their homes or in open natural spaces, saving their modest earnings for the construction of a "proper" church. The earliest known African American churches were A.M.E. churches. AME stands for African Methodist Episcopal, founded by ex-slave and freedman Richard Allen in 1787 in Philadelphia. There are several historic AME churches on Long Island including the Bethel AME Church in Copiague, which originally stood in Amityville, and the Bethel AME church in Setauket. Their churches were smaller when compared to Anglo American churches, but had similar features including wood clapboard sheathing, gable roofs and entrances, cupolas or bell towers, elevated pulpits and double-sash windows.

The Bethel AME Church in Setauket is part of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which has branches throughout the United States and overseas. The first AME church was established in 1787 by Richard Allen and other African American freedmen in Philadelphia. The AME church was founded to protest treatment of slaves by Anglo- based Methodist churches. The Bethel church in Philadelphia was the first church owned by African Americans in the country. More modest rural AME churches were founded in the post-civil war period in the south and mid-Atlantic region.



**Bethel AME Church in Setauket**

The first AME Church on Long Island, Bethel AME Church, was founded in 1814 in Amityville, now located in Copiague. Other historic AME churches on Long Island include the Roslyn AME Church and the Westbury AME church. The Bethel AME church in Setauket was founded in c. 1815, making it one of the oldest AME churches on Long Island. The Laurel Hill Cemetery, also established in 1815 is located a short distance away on Christian Avenue.

In 1848 the Bethel AME church consisted of a small sanctuary next to the cemetery, and had approximately 26 members, all of whom were freedmen. Although the cemetery still exists, the church was destroyed in the 1870s. In 1874 a newer structure was built at the site of the present church. A severe fire destroyed it in 1909. The current structure shown in the photograph was built in 1910 and had approximately 100 members, some of whom descended from the from the area's freedmen.

Like other African American churches on Long Island, the Bethel AME church was founded by freed slaves and freedmen alike. During the late 1700s and early 1800s there were approximately 4,800 slaves who lived in Suffolk County, who were either freed by their owners or who were granted their freedom in 1824 by the New York State legislature. Many worked as farmers, in local saw and grist mills and other small industries, as mates on whaling ships and as blacksmiths and carpenters.<sup>2</sup>

The design of the current church is very simple, with an open floor plan where there are no divisions and slightly raised

## 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.

**January 12:** Maritime Traditions of Great South Bay. 1-5 pm. American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West and 81<sup>st</sup> Street, New York City. Suggested admission is \$18/adult. See accompanying article. For information call (212) 769-5200.

**January 20:** Beyond Wiseguys: Italian Americans and the Movies. 2 pm at Huntington's Cinema Arts Centre. \$25 Members / \$35 Public Includes Post-screening Reception. 423 Park Ave., Huntington 631-423-7611. Tickets can be purchased online, at the box office during theater hours or by calling Brown Paper Tickets toll free at 1-800-838-3006.

**January 24:** Decorative maritime folk arts. East Meadow Public library. 12:30 pm. Admission is free. For directions and information contact the East Meadow Library at (516) 794-2570.

**February 4:** Elias Hicks lecture by Lauren Katz, Commack high school student. Jericho Public Library, 7 pm. Admission is free. For directions and information call (516) 935-6790.

**February 9:** The Rob Crowe Situation. 3 pm at the Mineola Public library. Free admission. For directions and information call (516) 746-8488.

**March 29<sup>th</sup>:** 2nd Annual Asian American Cultural Festival of Long Island. 1:00–6:00 pm. Free Admission. 6–9 pm: Classical Stage Performance by Asian Artists. \$10, \$20 & \$25. Charles B. Wang Center Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY. For more information and to purchase tickets call (631)543-5768 or visit [www.aacfli.com](http://www.aacfli.com).

pulpit and altar. One reason for this may be that as former slaves, the members did not want to be separated, as they had been as slaves in their homes and in their owners' churches such as the Caroline Church. This open seating plan is common in most African American churches. Other common features in African American church design are front gable entrances, stained glass windows, small bell towers above the entrance and modest size. The church is made of brick and cinder block, which protects the church from fire.

The African American community in Setauket was a small one that attracted the attention of local painter William Sydney Mount. He was part of the important art movement called The Hudson River School. He painted several works that included scenes of local residents fishing, playing the fiddle, and working on nearby farms. These paintings can be seen at the LI Museum in Stony Brook. Sadly, there are few written records left by African Americans for historians to study. Much of what we know is recorded through stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. While some descendants of the original founders still reside in Setauket, others have moved away. Today the congregation numbers approximately 100, continuing a tradition that is over 150 years old.

### Native American

Native Americans prayed and worshipped in natural settings, believing that the earth is sacred. Over time these spaces were developed. English settlers later forced them to worship in English churches erected on the new reservations, such as the Shinnecock Presbyterian Church near Southampton. However sacred grounds do remain that Native Americans continue to use for ceremonial occasions. ■

<sup>1</sup> <http://westburyquakers.org/qt/archive/files/1902Meetinghouse.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Shannon Moss, *Slavery on Long Island: Its Rise and Decline during the Seventeenth through Nineteenth Centuries*. 1985: St John's University mss.

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