

Ocean Beach: A Village Born

by Shoshanna McCollum

The centennial celebration for the Incorporated Village of Ocean Beach in 2021 may still be over a decade away, but in many ways the countdown for this benchmark year starts now. Businessman John Wilbur first purchased the land tract in the year 1908 that he would name Ocean Beach and subsequently subdivide into lots for sale on the open market. This was not the first real estate venture that took place on Fire Island, and it would not be the last. Still, this Fire Island community became very distinct and would become a land of many firsts over the course of its first century of birth.

In early maps Ocean Beach hamlet had a much different appearance. As the Nor'easters that would take away a row of ocean front houses had not yet happened, Ocean View Walk, the southern cross street, ran the full length of the community. It was also considerably shorter. Bungalow Walk defined its western border.

The three blocks that followed formed a separate enterprise known as Stay-A-While Estates. Founded in 1912, this tract would follow its own course of development until merging with its eastern neighbor in the following decade. To this very day a stroll down Bay Walk gives evidence of the separate emergence of the former sister communities. As one passes Whitney's Market there is a distinct bend in the walkway that gives away that these two communities were stitched together after the fact.

Offering a pleasant day away from the city heat, Wilbur would attract prospective clientele with ads in Brooklyn newspapers enticing them with free boat ride from Babylon. The 25 x 100

foot lots sold for \$100 each. Literature Wilbur published espoused the many health benefits of beach life to make the lots even more attractive:

As a matter of fact one of the most beneficial features of a sea bath is the salt inadvertently swallowed by bathers," reads a circa 1908 promotional flyer for Ocean Beach entitled A Doctor's Advice: Sea Water as Medicine. "It is a wonderful tonic for the liver, stomach and kidneys. In many cases it will cure biliousness where all drug preparations have failed. It is peculiarly effective in ordinary cases of indigestion, disordered stomach and insomnia, and has been known to produce excellent results in many cases of dyspepsia.

The quoted doctor in the flyer is never mentioned by name.

Besides the names given to the bungalows and cottages that popped up in the years to follow, legal addresses were designated from the original lot numbers Wilbur assigned as he drew up the land parcels. The lot numbers ambled up and down the Ocean Beach walkways at the stroke of Wilbur's pen in such a way that a stranger in Ocean Beach trying to locate a particular house can be driven to desperation even now, one hundred years later.

Most of the streets in the sister communities bore names typically found in any northeast coastal beach towns: Ocean Breeze, Bungalow Walk, Surf Road. Yet there are two distinct exceptions to this rule: Wilmot Road located in the former Stay-A-While Estates and Dehnhoff Walk in Ocean Beach.

Wilmot Road is named after the community's namesake, the late Wilmot M. Smith. A resident of Patchogue, Smith earned a distinguished career as a New York State Supreme Court Justice. He was also holder of the narrow land tract that became Stay-a-While Estates. After his death in 1906 his surviving heirs subdivided the tract into lots for commercial sale.

Dehnhoff Walk was originally named in honor of one of the early prominent citizens in the young community, the well known music publisher William R. Dehnhoff. Popular songs from the late 19th Century like "Baby Mine" and "When the Tide Comes In" came from his company in New York City. Mr. Dehnhoff never lived on the street that would take on his name. According to local legend he privately funded the paving of this main community thoroughfare so that he would be able to transport his piano with greater ease. This move would gradually change the face of the Ocean Beach walkways from wooden boardwalks to cement walkways.

In 1914, a mere half dozen years after it's founding, the community of Ocean Beach would become the only hamlet on Long Island to have a sewage disposal system. No Long Island community east of Jamaica, New York had a sewer system yet. It was becoming evident that Ocean Beach was developing faster than some areas of the mainland because of the influence of the summer population. Other amenities followed in short order.

Growth was not thriving in the hamlets -- it was booming! With a bustling business district and robust energy, Ocean Beach was shaping

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into a very different Fire Island community than others that had preceded it. And why not? Our nation had emerged from both the Spanish American War and the First World War richer and more powerful than ever, and this confidence was reflected within this fledgling development. However there was a catch: The benevolent founder of Ocean Beach maintained an iron-firm grip on the utilities that Ocean Beach depended on, including the water company, gas and the lighting franchises – all of which he owned.

John Wilbur was known as a righteous man. A Commissioner of the New York City Board of Education, he had been a driving force behind the effort to improve sanitary conditions in public school buildings across the metropolitan region. He was also credited with uncovering the great “piano graft” scandal of 1908, in which second-hand musical instruments were sold to the city schools as new.

Wilbur was also a staunch supporter of the Volstead Act. As the Prohibition era was ushered in, Wilbur’s missions with the U.S. Coast Guard chasing rumrunners off the coast of Long Island were regularly chronicled in headlines of the day in *The New York Times*. His role in the “Benson Estate” seizure and destruction of a liquor cache valued at \$400,000 in Montauk Point were among one of the more noteworthy of these ventures. Eventually John Wilbur was appointed Deputy Prohibition Administrator of Long Island, Brooklyn and Staten Island.

Wilbur certainly had a vision for his Fire Island hamlet, but as the community evolved there were rumblings that not all the people of Ocean Beach shared his vision. A few miles west, the community of Saltaire took the leap of becoming the first Incorporated Village on Fire Island in 1917. With its own local governing body Saltaire could elect a Mayor and other board members as well as establish a justice court. With this base they exercised greater decision-making latitude on such matters as street maintenance, garbage collection, and building codes among other things.

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Many felt if Ocean Beach followed this same venue the hamlet would at last have the autonomy to find its own destiny. Others vehemently disagreed with this incorporation notion. Those who opposed Village Incorporation for Ocean Beach believed it to be simply an excuse to levy taxes and add a layer of bureaucracy they viewed as unnecessary.

A petition was circulated by Ocean Beach residents to have the matter of incorporation considered by the Town of Islip. Stay-a-While was invited to join the petition. The majority of property owners of Stay-a-While saw the opportunity to merge with Ocean Beach as a positive thing. Islip Town Supervisor, John Westerbeke, approved the petition on September 5, 1920 and the matter was taken to public vote.

On March 5, 1921 an election was held to decide the matter. Seventy-four residents voted in favor of incorporation, 21 voted against it. The opposition filed an appeal to overturn the results. Suffolk County Court Judge George H. Furman dismissed the suit on April 9, 1921 and incorporation was at that time affirmed.

Over the next 10 years or so elected village officials in Ocean Beach utilized the instruments of acquisition and condemnation to gain control over the utility franchises John Wilbur held. It was never a matter of Wilbur being voted out of office or even run out of town; for a man like John Wilbur his fate must have been far worse -- irrelevance. The tides of popularity on prohibition had shifted, and as the years went by his influence in the community he had fostered was so marginalized that he slowly faded away from Village record.

A stroll through Ocean Beach today reveals numerous memorial plaques throughout the Village honoring the contributions of beloved residents during the past hundred years. None are in recognition of John Wilbur. Upon his death in 1955 *The New York Times* obituary of this multi-accomplished man opened with: “John Wilbur, 89, A Realty Leader – Original Developer of Fire Island Dies.”

Whether they knew it or not, the Village of Ocean Beach found its destiny: Its litigious birth was just the beginning. In the years and decades that followed outspoken residents at Village meetings would speak passionately on the issues of the day. Contentiously disputed elections would become a somewhat cyclical matter every few decades. Lawsuits about everything from public restrooms, cookie eating on the street and, most recently, the police assault trial would make national and international headlines. Over the span of 100 years this Village, just under a square-mile, continues to spark curiosity, intrigue and very strong feelings. For while Ocean Beach is unique, it is not that much different than anywhere else. **FT**