

SOUNDINGS

Bay Windows: Iconic Long Island Houses

Posted on 22 January 2016

Written by **Bill Bleyer**



Kevin Braunlich's bay house on Middle Island overlooks wetlands.

Two small boats carrying 10 visitors pulled away from the village dock in Freeport, New York, and headed down Long Creek toward the open water. They soon approached a ramshackle wooden house on pilings with a "No Wake Please" sign mounted on the end of its long plank dock. Two American flags flew from staffs flanking the house, identified by a sign over its door as "Wally World."

Wally World is a Long Island South Shore bay house, one of the vanishing icons of the region's maritime heritage. Used for hunting, fishing or just getting away, the shacks have fallen victim to government regulation over concern about pollution, erosion from wakes and the force of nor'easters and other storms, such as Sandy in 2012.

This unique world is usually only visible by boat, but twice a year a few of these homes are open to the public, thanks to tours given by Long Island Traditions (longislandtraditions.org), a non-profit maritime heritage group.

"The bay houses are small vernacular structures originally built by baymen for shelter while they harvested clams, oysters, scallops and killies for their livelihood," says Nancy Solomon, the organization's executive director. "In order to save time rowing to favored spots, the baymen built bay houses. Through the years they have been passed down from one generation to another."

After their initial use by fishermen, baymen and commercial duck hunters, recreational hunters found them useful. "After World War II, when many people came to Long Island, they also wanted to enjoy life on the bay and build bay houses for recreational use," Solomon says. "Since then there have been many changes in the bays. There are many fewer bay houses than there were back in the 1960s."

Boaters pass the houses in the towns of Hempstead and Islip and wonder what they are, Solomon says. "So we began these tours both as an educational opportunity for people not familiar with these bay houses and also to help preserve them," she says. "There aren't too many places left on Long Island where you can be part of a maritime heritage and a vernacular building tradition."

Most of the bay house owners descended from commercial fishermen, who passed their traditions to the current generation, says Solomon. "To have a bay house you have to have a love of the bay," she says. "You also have to have an incredible knowledge of how the bay works, so you know when you can go out and not get stuck on a sandbar. You have to know about carpentry, about siting a bulkhead, about the permitting process, but most importantly you have to know where things are in the bay because people build the bay houses to go hunting and fishing."

There's a lot of camaraderie among members of the bay house community. They help each other with projects, Solomon says, and the occupants use flags to signal each other. "When you first arrive at your bay house and want to let people know that you're there, you put your flag up," she says. "If you want company, you make sure your flag is all the way up. If you don't want company, you don't put your flag all the way up. And if you're home but don't have any food or drink, you fly your flag upside down."



"Wally World" was built in 1954 and is owned by Sarah and Wallace Beers, whose father previously owned the bay house.

Most of the towns on Long Island originally had bay houses, on the North Shore as well as the South Shore, Solomon says. After Congress passed the Clean Water Act in 1972, the federal government pressured the state and towns to get rid of the bay houses to protect water quality. Most of the bay houses are gone, and Islip and Hempstead require every house to have a composting toilet.

Before Sandy, there were about 40 structures in Hempstead; 14 survived. A half-dozen were rebuilt with help from the town of Hempstead and are strictly regulated by the New York state Department of Environmental Conservation. All of the houses damaged in the storm are expected to be rebuilt. Four of Islip's 40 houses were destroyed by Sandy, and the rest were damaged, though not badly, Solomon says.

The owners in Hempstead and Islip lease the land their homes sit on from the towns. They pay a fee in lieu of taxes, which ranges from \$1,500 to \$2,000 a year. Owners can transfer the lease to someone in their family or to someone with a longstanding relationship with the family.

The Islip houses are more protected than those in Hempstead. "People know not to bring the good furniture out there," Solomon says.

As the visitor boats pulled up at Wally World's dock on North Meadow Island, Solomon explained that Wally Beers was the third generation of this family to have a bay house. The family acquired the structure — its second bay house over the past 75 years — when the previous owner decided to build a larger one nearby.

The Beers house was built in 1954 by Donald Coons, owner of the Yankee Clipper motel in Freeport. Beers grew up out there, clamming, fishing and duck hunting, carrying on traditions passed down through his family, which had settled in nearby Baldwin in the early 1900s. The Beers family owned a meat market and a fish market there in the 1970s.

Tour visitors were greeted by Sarah Beers, 35, Wally's daughter, who has been coming to the house all her life. Wally died in 2013, and Sarah and her brother Wallace Jr. now own the structure. They use a 13-foot and 19-foot Boston Whaler to go to and from the house and to fish.

"I'm a bay rat," Beers says. "I've had my boating license since I was 8. I fish all the time. We catch bluefish, snappers, blowfish. I like to fish as a hobby, and I throw them back. You come out here and forget about what happened in your life all day."



Bay houses are fading icons of Long Island's maritime heritage.

The decking around the house shows some damage. Boards replaced after Sandy were damaged again in a nor'easter. The house was twice as big before the 2012 storm, which destroyed a bedroom wing and collapsed the roof. "Sandy came through and ripped the back of our house off and took everything from the inside and blew it out our front windows and right out to sea," Beers says.

The water was 4 feet deep in the house that time — the only previous flooding was during Hurricane Irene, when there were several inches of water in the house.

Like other bay houses, Wally World is supported by telephone poles driven into the ground that sit on mud sills, long planks resting on the marshland. "It's a unique framing system," Solomon says. "Most bay houses have to be moved up and back from time to time, and that's one of the reasons they are always constructed of wood. The wood used is usually cedar planks and locust posts because they are extraordinarily durable in a marshland environment."

Unfortunately for the homeowners, that environment is shrinking, sometimes from storms but more often from boat wakes. "There used to be a whole marshland out front," says Beers. Waves and wakes from charter fishing boats that ignore the no-wake sign "are eating away at our land and flooding our house."

Solomon says the boat traffic has been eroding the edge of the marsh by about a foot a year. "At low tide, this is a complete beach," says Beers. "You can clam, you can walk."

An artesian well supplies water to the house, and solar panels charge batteries that power it. Hurricane lamps that share the walls with family photographs serve as a backup. Most of the interior is occupied by a couch and table and chairs, with the one bed occupying an alcove. A sign by the sink reads: "Water main. Turn on the water when you arrive. Turn it off before you leave. The pump costs \$500 to replace. Thank you."

"We had Sandy and then we lost my dad, so we kind of rebuilt right after," Beers says. "He was a bayman, and he taught me. He died of a heart attack right before Christmas in 2012, right after Sandy. He was 63."

The family owns a construction company, which made rebuilding easier. They used repurposed materials from other construction jobs to fix the house. Still, Beers and her brother have decided not to replace the missing wing because it's so costly to build on the water. "And you don't know what's going to happen," she says. "Another storm could come across the bay and take us out."

The tour group reboarded the boats, headed east on Fundy Channel toward Swift Creek, and pulled up to a dock on Middle Island, which was under 6 inches of water during an unusually high tide. They removed their shoes and waded down the dock to visit the Braunlich bay house.



Bay houses are vulnerable to storms, so they are subject to government regulation over pollution and other concerns.

This house is owned by Kevin Braunlich, whose father and grandfather, Chris and Albert Braunlich, in 1957 built the original bay house that stood here. In 1997, a fire destroyed the structure, but the town allowed the family to rebuild a near replica. Unlike most of the other houses, this one was built for recreational use and has been expanded over the years. It was originally one large living room and two bedrooms, but several rooms have been added. Braunlich uses scrap materials to maintain the house, raised to avoid flooding after the fire, which helped it survive Sandy.

Sandy drove 3 feet of water into the house and damaged the siding, walkways, decks and the shed, says Braunlich, who was awaiting a state permit to rebuild the shed and decks. "We're a little bit of a family out here, so we try to help each other out," he says of debris cleanup and repair work after Sandy.

Braunlich has insurance for wind and fire incidents, and for liability, but does not have insurance for flooding — the house is too close to sea level to qualify. Gabion baskets filled with clamshells protect the foundation and help to limit erosion.

The interior of the house has wood paneling and carpeting, and is decorated with nautical items. Braunlich uses propane for lights, the refrigerator and stove, and he has a kerosene heater. There's a generator for other electrical needs. "I use compost toilets now," he says. "Years ago it was outhouses until everybody complained we were polluting the bay."

Braunlich uses his house from March or April through Thanksgiving. "I fish for flounder, weakfish, clam, hang out," says the retired town parks worker, who was wearing a sweatshirt that read "Kevin's Bay House."

He owns two boats, a Chincoteague and a Maritime Skiff. "I was on boats since I was six months old," he says. "People drive hundreds of miles to go upstate to rough it. I've got a half-hour boat ride."

This article originally appeared in the February 2016 issue.

Add your comment

Your name:

Your email:

Comment (you may use HTML tags here):

25E0

Word verification:

Post

Preview

[yvComment v.1.24.0](#)

BOAT CONNECTION

A weekly resource to Boats and Boating needs!



© 2016 Cruz Bay Publishing Inc., an Active Interest Media company.

P: (860) 767-3200 | F: (860) 767-1048 | info@soundingspub.com | 10 Bokum Rd., Essex, CT 06426